

Dalit [*bottom of the caste system*]

Fact Sheet compiled by the World Council of Churches, the World Student Christian Federation, and the World YWCA

There are 260 million Dalit people around the world, 166,635,700 of whom live in India.

In Asian countries where a caste system operates, Dalit people are born at the very bottom of a hierarchical system. Caste is determined by birth and whilst national law outlaws discrimination against people of low castes, in reality, there is still widespread oppression and violence against Dalit people.

Dalit means 'broken' or 'ground down'. Many people still use the word 'untouchable' which indicates the extreme discrimination which affects Dalit people. Even today, most higher caste people would not marry a Dalit person, invite them into their house or share food with them. Recent statistics indicate that every week in Dalit communities across India there are:

- 13 murders
- 5 Dalit homes burnt
- 6 Dalit people were kidnapped or abducted
- 21 Dalit women raped

Atrocities against Dalit people are a daily occurrence. The Scheduled caste and scheduled Tribes

(Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 in India defines the type of abuses which are illegal, including:

- forcing Dalit people to eat obnoxious substances
- assaulting Dalit women with intent to dishonor and outrage their modesty
- using a position of dominance to sexually exploit a Dalit woman
- corrupting or fouling a Dalit water source.

By listing these and other offences, the law reveals the awareness of the many ways in which

Dalit and Tribal people are subject to indignity, violence and abuse.

It is estimated that a crime is committed against a Dalit person every 18 minutes. The problem for many is not the law but the lack of political will, at local and national levels, to apply it. In 2006, the official conviction rate for Dalit atrocity cases was just 5.3%.

The statistics are horrifying:

- In rural areas, 37.8% of government-run schools make Dalit children sit separately from other children
- In 27.6% of rural villages, Dalits are prevented from entering police stations
- In 33% of rural villages, public health workers refuse to enter Dalit homes
- 48.4% of Dalit villages are denied access to water sources
- In 70% of rural villages, Dalit and non-Dalit people cannot eat together.

Dalit women experience triple discrimination based on their caste, their economic situation, and their gender. In rural India, 70% of Dalit women are illiterate. In the Southern States, thousands of girls are forced into prostitution before they reach puberty. Temple prostitutes or Joghinis (literally 'female servants of God') are usually Dalit. Once dedicated, the girl is unable to marry, forced to become a prostitute for upper caste members, and eventually auctioned off to an urban brothel.

The International Dalit Solidarity Network states:

"Violence, including sexual assault, is used by dominant castes as a social mechanism for humiliating entire Dalit communities."