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Comparative Contexts of Discrimination:
Caste and Untouchability in South Asia

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IIDS Objectives

- To conceptualise and theoretically understand social exclusion and discrimination in contemporary world.
- To develop methods and measuring tools for the study of discrimination and exclusions in social, cultural, political and economic spheres of everyday life and their consequences.
- To undertake empirical researches on measuring forms, magnitude and nature of discrimination in multiple spheres.
- To understand the impact of social exclusion and discriminatory practices on inter-group inequalities, poverty, human right violations, inter-group conflicts and economic development of the marginalised social categories.
- To undertake empirical research on the status of different excluded, marginalised and discriminated groups in Indian society *vis-à-vis* their social, cultural, political, and economic situations.
- To propose policy interventions for building an inclusive society through empowerment of the socially excluded groups in India and elsewhere in the world.
- To provide knowledge support and training to civil society actors.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and supporting organisations.

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Foreword

Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) has been amongst the first research organisations in India to focus exclusively on development concerns of the marginalised groups and socially excluded communities. Over the past six year, IIDS has carried-out several studies on different aspects of social exclusion and discrimination of the historically marginalised social groups, such as the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Religious Minorities in India and other parts of sub-continent. The Working Paper Series disseminates empirical findings of the ongoing research and conceptual development on issues pertaining to the forms and nature of social exclusion and discrimination. Some of our papers also critically examine inclusive policies for the marginalised social groups.

The working paper "Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia" is based on empirical studies carried out in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The paper offers brief introduction to the prevailing Dalit situation in respective countries while identifying specific problems of social inequality, discrimination and deprivation of Dalit groups. The four studies clearly bring out the fact that even when meanings of untouchability or its sources (religion or tradition) vary across regions, as also its forms from physical touch and residential segregation to taboos and restrictions on inter-dining, physical movement or pursuing occupations of their choice, the effect on these placed at the bottom are quite similar, economic deprivation, social exclusion and a life of humiliation.

Indian Institute of Dalit Studies gratefully acknowledges DANIDA and IDSN for funding this study. We hope our working papers will be helpful to academics, students, activists, civil society organisations and policymaking bodies.

Surinder S. Jodhka
Director, IIDS

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Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia

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1. Introduction

Breaking ranks with the Government of India, the foreign minister of Nepal, Jeet Bahadur Darjee Gautam during a meeting of the United Nations in September 2009, welcomed the inclusion of caste based discrimination against Dalits as a case of human rights violation, to be treated at par with the racial discrimination. This move of the Nepalese government opened-up way for implementing the proposal mooted by the UNHRC to involve “regional and international mechanism, the UN and its organs” to complement national efforts to combat caste based discrimination.

This paper is based on a four country study of 'Caste Based Discrimination in South Asia' covering Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The study was coordinated by the Indian Institute of Dalit studies (IIDS), New Delhi and funded by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), Denmark. The research team included Kalinga Tudor Silva, P.P. Sivapragasam and Paramsothy Thanges for Sri Lanka; Iftekhar Uddin Chowdhury for Bangladesh; Zulfiqar Ali Shah for Pakistan; and Krishna B. Bhattachan, Tej B. Sunar and Yasso Kanti Bhattachan for Nepal. Chitteranjan Senapati and Sobin George coordinated the project from IIDS. The authors would like to thank Rikke Nohrlind of the IDSN for her support; Martin Macwan, S.K. Thorat, Vincent Manoharan, Paul Diwakar and Gowhar Yaqoob for their inputs. Full Reports can be accessed from <http://dalitssouthasia.org>.

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Caste and practice of untouchability have for long been known as “peculiar” cultural practices of the people of India, particularly the Hindus. Given that Nepal too is country with Hindu majority, its affirmation of including caste based discrimination in the list of UN activities is quite significant. It not only paved the way for internationalisation of the question of caste based discrimination but also underlined the point that caste and untouchability, where some communities are treated as impure and status is determined by birth, exist beyond India, in other countries of South Asia and elsewhere in the world. One could easily think of the Blacks in USA or the *Burakumin* of Japan in this context. Anthropologists have also reported the presence of ‘untouchability’ in several countries of Africa where some tribal communities are viewed as “polluting” by the dominant communities and kept at a distance from the mainstream of social and cultural life. They are known as *Osu*, *Omoni*, *Adu*, *Ebo*, *Ume*, *Ohu*, *Oruma* et. (see, for example, Lewis 1999, Smythe 1953, Devos 1966). Even when meanings of untouchability or even its sources (religion or tradition) vary across regions, as also its forms, from physical touch and residential segregation to taboos and restrictions on inter-dining, physical movement or pursuing occupations of one’s choice, its effects on those placed at the bottom are quite similar, viz. economic deprivation, discrimination and a life full of humiliation.

Interestingly, the early social anthropological studies, particularly those carried out during 1950s and 1960s, often pointed to the existence of caste based hierarchies and untouchability in other countries of South Asia as well (see, for example Hofer 2005; Banks 1971; Leach 1971; Barth 1971). In contrast, a large majority of the recently produced social science writings on caste and the contemporary political discourse on Dalit identity/ politics tend to focus almost exclusively on India. This is despite the fact that the word Dalit eventually was becoming popular among deprived caste communities across the South Asian region.

Based on empirical studies carried out in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka during 2007-08, this paper offers a brief introduction to the prevailing Dalit situation in the four countries and identifies specific problems of social inequality and deprivation of Dalit groups in these countries.

2. Caste and its Recognition

Caste has indeed been in existence for centuries in South Asia. Though its forms and, sometimes, even its contents varied across regions, it was practiced in most of South Asia. However, it was during the British colonial rule that a common

theory of caste, as we have come to understand it today, was first articulated (Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001). Extending their notion of oriental cultures, caste and untouchability were perceived in the colonial discourse to be peculiarly Indian and Hindu practices. The colonial writers also developed theories and models of caste system where it appeared as cohesive and peacefully integrated system, constantly reproducing itself through the idea of *Karma* and notions of purity and pollution. According to this understanding, caste was found among all Hindus, across the sub-continent, and without any internal variation or difference. Caste became a metaphor of tradition and rigidity. Since it had survived for ages, without any change, the basic principles of its working could presumably be de-coded from the ancient Hindu texts. Following this, one could also assume that since caste was essentially a cultural and ideological reality with its roots in classical Hindu texts, it did not exist among the non-Hindus, the believers in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism or Sikhism.

Even when the census enumerators and anthropologists reported the existence of caste-like structures among the non-Hindus in the sub-continent, such reports were not considered relevant. The presence of caste like relations among them was often attributed either to the Hindu cultural influence, or as evidence of their Hindu ancestry, their having been converted from Hinduism to Islam or Christianity.

While caste indeed has a religious dimension and it finds legitimacy in religious texts of the Hindus, it is also a socio-economic system¹ which shaped local economies, social and cultural entitlements and political regimes. In other words caste was much more than an ideological system. The idea of caste and associated social and economic structures persisted with varied religious tradition of the South Asian region. For example, though Islam is popularly believed to be an egalitarian religion, Muslim communities of the region have evolved their own systems of hierarchical relations, where some are considered more equal than others. Such notions of "(caste) hierarchies" are also justified by referring to the religious texts or traditions of Islam. This is well argued by the author of our Bangladesh Report. Citing works of Karim (1956) and Blunt (1931), Iftekhar Uddin Chowdhury (2008) writes:

... Islam introduced a new type of social stratification in which the highest were those who were the closest to the Prophet ... in blood, faith and geography. ... Even the Islamic jurisprudence recognises this rule of precedence. ...

According to the Sunni School of Jurisprudence, the descent or the lineage is the most important which could be categorised as follow: (i) An Arab is superior to

a non-Arab (*Ajamī*) Muslim, (ii) Amongst Arab ... descendents of Hazrat Ali come first and among them the *Quraysh* are above all other Arabs, save Hazrat Ali's descendents, (iii) The descendents of the Caliphs, (iv) A learned non-Arab (*Ajamī*) is equal to an ignorant Arab, (v) A *Qazi* (a Muslim judge) or a *Faqih* (a Muslim jurist theologian) ranks higher than a merchant and a merchant than a tradesman.

Similarly, the Sinhala Buddhist communities of Sri Lanka seem to defy the theological position of their faith. Even when no one is "unclean" in the sacred meaning of the term, social anthropologists have documented the presence of caste like hierarchies, identification of occupations with social groups and even "outside untouchables" (Banks 1960; Leach 1960; Ryan 1993).

However, it is the colonial constructs and theoretical models of caste that continue to dominate not only the popular but also academic imagining of caste. Even the leaders of nationalist movements in the subcontinent accepted this colonial common-sense on caste quite uncritically. Thus when the new states were formed, of India, Pakistan and even Sri Lanka, it was only India which had Hindu majority, recognised the need to deal with caste and untouchability and made provisions for the uplift of those who had been kept out of the system, the untouchable whom the colonial rulers had designated as Scheduled Castes.

Interestingly, though caste has not been of much concern in any of the four South Asian countries we studied, references to it were not completely absent in the official policy discourses or legal systems. Pakistan, for example, continued to officially use the category of Scheduled Caste, albeit for a section of its Hindu population. Bangladesh, which was carved out of Pakistan in 1971, also uses the category Scheduled Castes in the same fashion. The Gandhian category of Harijan has also been in use in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. It was also not difficult for our researchers to identify and locate Dalit communities in their respective countries.

Besides the use of these generic categories, the four countries also have local names for certain communities, the meaning of which is very close to untouchables. These terms/names are also deployed to distinguish them from the social mainstream of these societies. In Nepal, for example, they are commonly referred to with 'many derogatory terms in *Khas* Nepali language. They are *paninachalne* (water polluting), *acchoot* (untouchables), *avarna*, *doom*, *pariganit*, *tallo jat* (low caste) etc. The official documents of the Nepalese Government and other non-governmental organisations tend to look at them through the language

of development and use terms such as *uppechhit* (ignored), *utpidit* (oppressed), *pacchadi pareka* (lagging behind), *bipanna* or *garib* (poor), *nimukha* (helpless), *simantakrit* (marginalised), *subidhabata banchit* (disadvantaged), *alpasankhyak* (minorities), or *banchitikanma pareka* (excluded).

Similarly Bangladesh has an elaborate set of names for its Dalits, both Hindus and Muslims. While the Hindu Dalits are clubbed under the category of *Harijan* (or *Harijon*, in the local parlance), the Muslims Dalits are often classified as *Arzals*. However, more common way of identifying or describing them is through their caste names, which continue to be closely associated with traditional caste based occupations. This continued identification of caste groups with traditional occupations also reflects continuity of their social and economic realities and near absence of any kind of diversification of their occupations and economic life. Some of the occupations almost completely associated with specific groups or communities and occupy "low" position in the status hierarchy of occupations, and they are always low paying. These are 'sweepers (*harijan*), barber, washer, dyer, blacksmith, goldsmith, cobbler (*Muchi*), oil-presser, boatmen (*Mazi*), weavers, hunters, sawyers, Kasai (Butcher), gardener (*Mali*), *Darji* (tailor), *Hajam* (quack for circumcision), drum beater (*Dholak*):

Though caste continues to be an important category of kinship and community classifications in Pakistan, Dalit question is a little more complicated there. Given that the term Scheduled Caste is still officially used for the "untouchable" communities of its small Hindu minority and that almost the entire Christian population of the country are converts from Dalit *Chuhra*s of Punjab, caste question gets closely entangled with the minority question in Pakistan. However, quite like Bangladesh, caste and untouchability also exists among the Muslims of Pakistan. Though the mainstream Islamic ideology completely denies any place to caste in Pakistan, its presence, in the form of social intercourse, birth based occupation, segregation in residence and taboo in social relationship is very widely recognised and plays an important role in structuring kinship and political economy of the country (see Alavi 1972; Gazdar 2007). Popular categories with which Dalits of Pakistan are identified are not completely alien to Indians. For example *Mochi* (cobblers), *Pather* (brick maker), and *Bhangi* (sweeper) are mostly Muslims and considered "lower" castes on the basis of their family occupation, regardless of their religion. There are other titles, such as *Musalman Sheikhs*, *Mussalis* (both used for Muslim Dalits) and *Masihi* (Christians) universally refer to specific groups of people, also identified with specific occupation and used to segregate them from the rest as "untouchable" groups. It is not only the Dalits who are identified through caste names. Others too have caste names and maintain caste boundaries

in kinship ties and in building other social network. As one of the respondent told to our Pakistani researcher:

“Caste is so obvious and important in Pakistan that you go on streets and talk to people, first question you would be asked is about your caste... All these nations Pakhtoons, Punjabis, Sindhis, Balochis despite shared religion and ethnicity are further divided in uneven castes and tribe systems.” (Shah 2008:7)

The Sri Lankan study also focused both on Hindus and non-Hindus, the Tamil speaking population and the Buddhist Sinhala society. Though Buddhism does not have a notion of untouchability, a small proportion of Sinhala population is treated as untouchable with a clear notion of caste distinction. Here too, the untouchable communities are known by their community names. The Indian influence on the local discourse on caste in Sri Lanka seems minimal. Neither *Harijan* nor Dalit are used to describe the “untouchable” castes. The long radical political movements have also played a role in weakening the practice of caste and untouchability in Sri Lankan context.

3. Caste Demographics

Of the four, Nepal is the only country where some kind of quantitative data on the subject has been officially collected and made available. As per the 2001 Census, Nepal had 12.8 per cent Dalits in its total population of 22.3 million (Bhattachan et al. 2008). However, unlike India, Nepal does not have a history of mapping or Scheduled Dalit castes and legally the category is still evolving there. No systematic data on caste or Dalits is collected in the other three countries.

Pakistan enumerates Scheduled Caste population but only as a part of its Hindu minority population. The Scheduled Caste Hindus are mostly concentrated in rural areas of Sindh province. According to the 1998 Census, the Scheduled Castes constituted 13.6 per cent of its 2.44 million Hindu minority population. However, as mentioned above, caste based divisions and practice of untouchability is not confined to Hindus alone. There are a large number of Muslim groups treated as untouchables by dominant Muslim groups, particularly in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab. Besides, almost the entire Christian population of Pakistan are converts from Dalit communities and many of them continue to be treated so even today by the dominant communities of the country. Given the large presence of Scheduled Castes in the total population of Indian Punjab (nearly 29 per cent) and the fact that a large proportion of Dalits chose to declare their religion Islam instead of migrating to the Indian side at the time of Partition (see Kaur 2008) their presence in Pakistani Punjab is likely to be quite significant. Similarly, if one

was to compare Bangladesh with its Indian counterpart, West Bengal, one could assume that the Dalit population in the country would be close to around 15 to 20 per cent.

In Sri Lanka, like Bangladesh and Pakistan, caste is not included as a demographic category and thus there is no official enumeration of it. In their Report on Sri Lanka Tudor Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges (2008) claim that nearly 90 per cent of country's population recognises caste for some purpose at least and as many as 20 to 30 per cent are victims of caste based discrimination because of their being considered "low" or untouchable.

It will perhaps be safe to assume that the four countries of South Asia have a population ranging from 15 to 25 per cent which experience caste based prejudice and discrimination, which in turn also produces poverty and social exclusion of some communities.

4. Caste Means Discrimination

As our detailed reports and other writings on the subject show, there is enough qualitative evidence to suggest that caste differences exist in these four countries of South Asia. Further, they exist not simply in terms of distinctive group identities or ethnic difference, reproduced through caste endogamy; but also in terms of hierarchy and ideas of purity and pollution. Interestingly, in some ways, there seem to be striking similarities across different regions of the subcontinent in the manner in which caste based deprivation is reproduced on ground. However, the four reports also bring-out significant differences in the nature and extent of discrimination across the four countries and among different communities within the countries.

One of the most striking features of South Asia is the association of Dalit communities with certain types of jobs. For example, the cleaning of streets and latrines, dealing with dead animals, casual and bonded labour on land are almost everywhere identified with Dalit communities. Not only are these low status jobs, invariably they are also low paid jobs. Another common feature of Dalit life in these four countries is their residential segregation. They seem to be either living in segregated settlements away from the main village, or in the urban slums where living conditions are generally poor. The experience of untouchability and discrimination was also a shared reality but its details varied.

As mentioned above, of the four South Asian countries, Nepal is the only one (apart from India) which recognises the reality of caste. Quite like India, Nepal

has an official commission, called the National Dalit Commission (NDC), set-up in 2002. NDC performs the kinds of functions that the Scheduled Castes Commission does in India. The Commission has identified 22 groups as Dalits with sub-castes within them. These communities continue to experience untouchability in some form or the other. Though some of them live in mixed localities, they mostly live in segregated settlements in rural and urban centres of Nepal. Untouchability continues to be widely practiced in religious and socio-cultural sites against some of these caste groups. For example, it is still very difficult for most Dalits to marry outside their communities. Some of the Dalit castes are denied entry into Hindu temples. They are also not permitted to eat with others during festivals and weddings. Similarly they are denied free access to public sources of drinking water. As many as 17 of 18 Dalit castes interviewed for the Nepal study reported that if they touched water filled by the non-Dalits, the latter threw away the water. They are not allowed to touch the tap. If they wish to collect water they are required to wait for a non-Dalit to fill water for them while they are made to stand at a distance from the public water source.

Thanks to the growing influence of Dalit movements and Maoist insurgency, caste based discrimination has been declining in Nepal. Caste based discrimination is comparatively lesser in urban areas. However, it has not gone away. For example one of the issues recently raised by Dalit movements in Nepal was about the discrimination against Dalits in collection of milk. Some of them still find it hard to sell milk to the vendors because of their caste. Similarly, untouchability can be experienced in tea-shops and at restaurants.

Some Dalit communities also reported prejudice and discrimination in provision of health services. In this context Nepal seems very similar to India. Given that a large majority of Dalits are also poor, they find it hard to access private health care and the state-supported health services are not good enough. The story of education also seems similar. Despite state policy and concerted efforts by some activist groups, Dalit enrolment continues to be quite low. Though lesser than past, some communities reported caste based segregation in schools. Dalit children were treated differently by teachers as well as their peers. Teachers used derogatory words for Dalits and made them sit on the back benches. Given their economic weaknesses, many Dalit children drop-out of school and join their parents in their struggle for earning livelihood.

While the presence of caste is widely recognised in Nepal it is a taboo in contemporary Sri Lanka. Interestingly, caste was the primary category of classification in the region and was used in all regional censuses until 1871 when

it was replaced by race and nationalities for classification of Sri Lankan population. Even though the colonial regimes did not see Sri Lanka as being a caste society it nevertheless worked with the idea of caste for many different ways, including selecting suitable officials for administration of countryside, tax collection, and even in recruiting and managing workers in the plantation economy developed by them (Silva et al, 2008).

Though caste system is relatively less rigid in Sri Lanka, it continues to be a core feature of its social structure. Kalinga Tudor Silva and his colleagues who worked on the Sri Lankan Report identify three parallel caste systems being practiced by the three major ethnic groups of the country, *viz* the Buddhist Sinhals (around 74 per cent of the total population), the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Indian Tamils (together making for around 20 percent of the total population) caste system. Each of these is based on some idea of hierarchy and discrimination. While the importance of caste has indeed diminished over the years, some pockets of caste discrimination continue to exist. Sri Lanka also has witnessed certain new forms of caste discrimination which have emerged in the plantation economy, sanitary and scavenging services, and more recently in context of civil war and tsunami re-habilitation.

The pre-colonial Sri Lankan state was built around caste-based privileges of the ruling elite and hereditary and mandatory caste services of the bottom layers in society. Unlike the Hindu caste system founded on the basis of religious notions of purity and pollution, the caste systems in Sri Lanka have relied more on a kind of secular ranking upheld by the state, land ownership and tenure, religious organisations and rituals, and firmly-rooted notions of inherent superiority and inferiority. The official requirement and support to the caste systems has indeed eroded over the years but the state has also turned a blind eye to the deprivations caused by caste discrimination. The militant Tamil movement led by LTTE also imposed a ban on the practice of caste for consolidating Tamil identity, which only turned it into a kind of underground reality, not to be confronted openly through politics and policy.

The political regime of pre-British Sinhala society was based on a feudal social order, a system of land tenure and extraction of services around the institution of caste and legitimised by a ritual order (Peiris 1956). The ruling elites were identified as 'born to rule' social formation. The lower orders of society consisted of a *Goigama*, independent peasantry comprising the bulk of Sinhala population, coastal low-country caste groups who were viewed as being outside the indigenous caste system, a range of service castes with hereditary *rajakariya*,

providing services to the king. They were tied to the elite through land allotments. At the bottom of the social order were caste groups expected to perform “menial” services such as removal of dead animals and dirt, *rodi*, public execution of criminals, *gahala* and manufacture and supply of mats and other useful artifacts using raw material collected from the jungle, *kinnara*. Around 1 per cent of the total Sinhala population was engaged in menial services and they lived in isolated but congested villages usually hidden in the jungle.

Caste discrimination, however, was not limited only to those engaged in menial services. Groups like *Vahumpura* (domestic servants of Goigama), *Padu* (farm workers of Goigama), *Kumbal* (potters), *Berava* (drummers and dancers), *Rada* (washermen) and *Nawandanna* (smiths) (Jiggins 1979) were also treated as untouchables or near untouchables. All these groups together constituted around one-fourth of the total Sinhala population. “Lower” status of these groups was reinforced by overlapping conditions such as landlessness, caste-specific family and personal names, service obligations towards higher orders in society, forms of dress and patterns of deference and demeanor built into inter-caste relations of all kinds.

Buddhism has also organisationally adapted caste in its social and religious set-up. For instance, the popular annual religious rituals and cultural pageantries such as the *Kandy Perahara* conducted in honour of sacred tooth relic in the Temple of the Tooth where the four guardian deities were displayed, the caste order was celebrated (Seneviratne 1978).

As elsewhere, the system of caste based hierarchies in Sri Lanka has also seen many changes over the years. Many of the traditionally underprivileged caste groups in Sinhala society have gradually moved-up and have improved their living conditions through the opportunities offered by the Sri Lankan welfare state. These opportunities, however, have not evenly benefited all such caste groups or all members within a specific caste group, and there are many depressed caste pockets where poverty, landlessness, low human dignity, unemployment and poor living conditions continue to exist. They also experience caste-like discrimination from other communities and official institutions. The study clearly showed lower educational achievement, extreme poverty, over-crowded settlements, poor asset ownership and pressure to pursue hereditary caste occupations despite a strong dislike for such occupations.

Historically, caste based divisions and discriminations have been much stronger among Sri Lankan Tamils in Jaffna where untouchability has a religious sanction.

The upper-end of the caste hierarchy has traditionally been occupied by the land-owning Vellâlar (Pfaffenberger 1982; Siddartan 2003; Mahroof 2000) and the bottom end was collectively referred to as "panchamar", consisting of Vannâr (Dhoby, i.e. Washerman), Ampattar (Barber), Pallar (Landless labourers), Nalavar (Toddy tappers) and Parayar (Funeral drummers). They were treated as untouchables in Jaffna society. Vellâlars have also been numerically predominant in the peninsula (around 50 per cent) while the panchamar were around 18 per cent of the Jaffna population. In between Vellalars and Panchamars were several intermediary caste groups who also experienced some kind of discrimination but were not treated as outcaste or untouchables.

Panchamars were prohibited from wearing respectable clothing, denied access to public transport, drinking water, temples and tea shops. Beginning with 1920s, the region also witnessed Dalit movements demanding 'equality in seating and eating for school children', Teashop Entry Movement in the 1950s and Temple Entry Movement in the 1960s. These campaigns sometimes also resulted in violent clashes between Vellâlars and Panchamars and achieved a measure of success in reducing manifest forms of caste discrimination. However, by 1970s these struggles were given-up. The rise of Tamil identity politics sought to unify all Tamils irrespective of caste, class and other divisions in their struggle against the Sinhala dominated state. Though Tamil militancy enabled the non-Vellâlar groups to assert themselves politically but the Eelam struggle also silenced the caste struggle in the interest of 'national liberation struggle'. Caste was officially banned but caste discrimination did not disappear (Schalk 1992, 1997).

The third category of population where caste continues to be a predominant mode of social organisation is that of "Indian Tamils". They are called Indians because they were taken to Sri Lanka by the British rulers from southern India during middle of the 19th century to set-up tea/coffee plantation. Though politically a marginal group, they make for more than 6 per cent (roughly 1.3 millions) of the total population of the country and nearly 80 per cent of them continue to be a part of the plantation economy.

While establishing plantation, the colonial rulers almost re-established the caste based division. Those who were taken for labouring jobs were mostly from Dalit caste groups, while the supervisory work was invariably given to the non-Dalits. Similarly, some of the low status jobs, such as sanitary labour or washing of clothes were treated as caste occupation in the plantations. A large majority of them being Hindus, their ritual life also reinforced hierarchy.

Though caste divisions continue, caste-based discrimination appears to have progressively weakened among the plantation workers. There are two sectors where elements of caste-based discrimination continue. First, the trade unions are mostly controlled by high castes in the plantation community in spite of the workforce being predominantly of Dalit background. There are also urban communities of sanitary labourers of Indian Tamil origin who continue to experience a degree of social exclusion due to a combination of factors, which include their ethnic, caste and occupational backgrounds and their concentration in ghetto-like crowded urban settlements.

The other two countries, Pakistan and Bangladesh, not only have a shared political history among themselves but also with India. However, even though a large geographical area of the two countries, in a sense, shared cultural history with present day India, their contemporary social and political realities are imagined very differently from the Indian side. For example, while caste figures quite prominently in colonial accounts of the united Punjab and it continues to be used as a category of demographic classification and social policy in the Indian Punjab, discourse on caste is almost completely missing in the Pakistani Punjab. Same could be said about some other parts of Pakistan (such as Sindh) and Bangladesh.

Though predominantly a Muslim populated country (90 per cent); Bangladesh also has a good number of Hindus (around 9 per cent). More than the religious demographics, social organisation of the region resembles closely with neighboring India. For example, the village settlements in Bangladesh are quite like those on the Indian side, in West Bengal and other parts of eastern India. As in a typical Indian village these settlements are divided on caste lines and Dalits are invariably made to live outside the boundary of the main village. Even in urban and semi-urban settlements there are localities named after the predominant occupation of their residents, such as *Harijan Patti*, *Bede Colony*, and *Sweeper Colony*.

Culturally also, South Asian Islam has its own notion of hierarchy, which divided people into caste like status groups, such as *Ajlaf*, *Afzal* and *Arzals*. Quite like the Hindu caste system, these divisions are based on some notion of purity and pollution. South Asian Islam also practices a notion of endogamy which reinforces caste-like group divisions. And most importantly, a large number of communities in Bangladesh remain associated with their hereditary occupations which carry a status group identity.

Most of the Hindu Dalits of Bangladesh are believed to be descendents of migrants from the Indian side of the subcontinent, from the current states of Bihar, Uttar

Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh. They were first taken to the city of Dhaka by the Mughal rulers in the early 17th century. However, a larger number of them came during the first half of the nineteenth century when the British rulers brought them for various kinds of menial services.

Though Bangladesh was formed as a secular democratic country in 1971 after it separated from Pakistan, it has, over the years developed strong majoritarian tendencies, which have taken the form of institutionalised discrimination against the Hindu minority. Dalits, who make for nearly one-fourth to one-fifth of the Bangladeshi Hindu population, become double victims of Islamic majoritarianism as well as caste untouchability. Their representation in the political institutions is abysmally low. Their economic conditions are predictably bad with most of them working in low paying traditional caste occupations. Our study revealed that a large proportion of them received below the officially prescribed minimum wage. Nearly three-fourth of the surveyed respondents earned less than 5000 Takka in a month (less than 75 US \$ per month). Nearly two-third of them, both Hindu and Muslim Dalits have had no education. They live in temporary (*kacha*) houses made of bamboo and hey and have poor access to water, sanitation and other public services. Interestingly, the survey showed that the condition of Muslim Dalits was worse than those of the Hindu Dalits. While 75 per cent of the Hindu Dalits lived in *kacha* houses, the number of Muslim Dalits in the category was above 90 per cent.

Dalits in Bangladesh also face discrimination in political sphere as well as in civic life. Many of them reported that they were not treated well even by the doctors and nurses in hospitals and clinics. They were also not allowed entry into their houses. The Hindu Dalits faced much more discrimination in religious life. They were not allowed entry into temples and were discouraged from participating in religious/community functions. Though in past some sections of Muslim Dalit communities such as Lalbegi, Abdal and Bediya, (popularly known as Arzal), engaged in occupations such as toilet cleaning and garbage collection were often not allowed entry into mosques, there seemed to be no such restriction in place any longer. However, otherwise, the condition of Muslim Dalits did not seem to be any better than those of the Hindu Dalits. The number of Muslim Dalits complaining about practice of untouchability against them in tea shops was much higher (around 40 per cent) than the Hindu Dalits (around 15 per cent). Same was the case with having access to hotel rooms. Access to water from public and private sources was also denied to both categories of Dalits.

Schools have been reported to be important sites of caste discrimination by the literature on untouchability in India. This seems to be true for other countries of South Asia as well. Bangladesh, where our team looked at it more closely, found strong evidences of discrimination against Dalit children, of both Hindu and Muslim background. They were treated differently by teachers and found it hard to play with children from other castes/ communities. In many places they are not allowed to drink water from common sources and are discouraged to participate in cultural activities and sports. Surprisingly, in schools also the Muslims Dalit children seem to be facing more discrimination than the Hindu Dalits.

Pakistan also has many similarities with Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. Though caste is one of the core social institutions, its presence is rarely acknowledged in the official discourses on poverty, development or human rights. Hindus make for a little less than 2 per cent of the total population of Pakistan. Besides, Pakistan also has around 1.6 per cent Christian population. The overwhelming majority population (nearly 95 per cent) of the country is of believers in Islam. Islam is also its professed political ideology. The two nation theory, which provided justification for the formation of a separate Pakistan, was premised on the fact that socially and culturally South Asian Muslims were different from the Hindus. While Hindus believed in caste hierarchy, Muslims were all equal and hence constituted a separate nation. Even today this remains a core of the official doctrine of the Pakistani state.

Caste and religion have always been interwoven in complex ways. While Hinduism has often been seen, and rightly so, to provide a theological justification to caste hierarchy, the Pakistani state uses Islamic identity and ideology to completely deny the presence of caste in the social and economic life of country even when caste-based identities and caste related discrimination are quite rampant in the country, including among the Muslims. Such official denial of caste also works to the double disadvantage of the Hindu and Christian Dalits of Pakistan. While being members of a small religious minority, they confront a hostile majoritarian state and civil society; being Dalits they also remain marginalised within their own religious communities.

The representatives of Hindu Scheduled Castes have often contested this and have claimed to be much larger in numbers than officially reported. They are mostly concentrated in the Sindh region and nearly 93 per cent of them live in rural areas. As expected, a large majority of them do not own agricultural land or other employment/income generating assets. They mostly work as tenants and attached labourers (*Haris*) with big landowners. While the system of attached

labour has undergone lot of change in India, social relations of production in Sindh and some other parts of Pakistan continue to be of pre-capitalist nature with widespread use of un-free labour. A large majority of rural Dalits, Hindus and Muslims continue to work as bonded slaves with the big landowners, particularly in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab. Even those who migrate in search of livelihood end-up with debts and bondage type relations.

Survey conducted among the Hindu SCs of Sindh revealed that nearly 85 per cent of them earn less than 3000 Pakistani rupees (around 36 US \$) per month, far below the official minimum wage of 4,600 rupees. Scheduled Caste workers also pointed to widespread discrimination against them. A majority of them (58 per cent) reported that they get lesser wages than upper castes Muslim and Hindu workers for the same type of work. This differential was particularly widespread in the Sindh province.

All these predictably lead to their poor conditions of living. For instance, the study showed that a large majority of them live in *kacha* houses with poor health. A large majority of them are illiterate and often find it hard to send their children to schools. As is typical of caste societies, Dalits of Pakistan face severe discrimination in everyday life, some of which are common and some other peculiar to the local context. Community-wise segregated housing appears to be a norm in most of the Pakistan. In some areas the whole village population would be from a particular clan. Similarly, in multi-caste community settlements, status group hierarchy is quite common and visible. In Sindh, for example, most villages have separate *Mohalas* of Syeds, who are considered as upper caste and they keep themselves at a distance from other castes. On the other end, Dalit groups like the *bagris* are made to live at outskirts of the village because they are considered untouchable and polluting by others, upper caste Hindus and Muslims. "They eat dead animals and their bodies smell and after all they are *Bagris* and non-Muslims. How can we let them live in our *Mohala*?", a Muslim respondent from a Sindh village told our researcher.

They also experience classical form of untouchability in the public sphere. For example, as many as 77 per cent reported having been denied services of barber and 90 per cent reported that the local restaurant served them tea and food in separate utensils. Many of them felt that they were harshly treated to the extent of being hated by the dominant groups. Dalit children who go to school are made to sit in the last rows and often treated badly by the teachers.

The burden of caste also has a gender dimension. Beside low wages and difficult living conditions, Dalit women often face sexual assault while they are working in

farms of the rich farmers. There have also been several cases of young Dalit women being abducted and sexually exploited.

Even though the category 'Scheduled Caste' continues to be used in Pakistan, it does not have any special development schemes or programmes for its Dalit population. On the contrary, some of the legal provisions such as the law against blasphemy are often used against members of the religious minorities, Christians and Hindus, by the locally dominant individuals in events of conflict.

5. Concluding Comments

Social groupings based on their descent, often described ethnic groups or communities, have existed and continue to exist almost everywhere in the present day world. With growing incidences of human migrations across countries and continents, such diversity of human groups has only been growing over time. These diverse cultural or ethnic groups do not always co-exist in harmony and often become markers of political identities on the basis of which power is distributed across communities. While such "minorities" and "majorities" are a fact of political and social life all over the world, the institution of caste is specific to South Asia where groups are not only treated differentially but some groups are kept out as "untouchable" and "polluting".

Caste differences are also not simply cultural or economic differences. Caste inequality, as Ambedkar had argued, is graded inequality (Ambedkar 1987; Jaffrelot 2003), where inequality exists at all levels of social groupings. Even those classified as outcaste or untouchables are also internally divided and unequal. Not only do such differences make it difficult for those at the receiving end of the system to mobilise against the powerful but it also institutionalises discrimination and exclusion in a much more complicated way. Discrimination becomes a cultural trait in such social formations.

It is in this context that we need to understand the contextual specificity of the category Dalit. It was only when the colonial state classified them under a single category as depressed classes, and later as Scheduled Caste, that it became possible for them to start imagining themselves as a single political community with common experience and interest, as Dalits.

However, the colonial constructs and classifications of caste groupings also imposed their own limitations. They identified caste exclusively with Hinduism and India. However, the fact is that caste-culture exists across different countries

of South Asia and even among the followers of other religious faith systems. While the extent and form varies, communities are invariably divided on the basis of their birth within a framework of hierarchy where some groups, engaged in “polluting” occupations, are kept out as untouchables.

Caste divisions and differences have perhaps not been as strong in countries like Sri Lanka, Bangladesh or Pakistan as they have been in India, or in some of its regions. However, unlike India, there has been no recognition of their special situation as socially excluded and deprived. Since the states in these countries do not recognise caste, they also do not collect data on their numbers and around variables of their economic status. In contrast the state policies have played a critical role in producing Dalit elite, which has played an important role in articulating Dalit aspirations and identity. No such process is visible anywhere else in South Asia. In this context Gellner’s observation made about Nepal is worth quoting. Writing in 1995, Gleener observed:

... Nepalese state has so far taken no measures of positive discrimination in favour of those disadvantaged by the caste system, as have long been in place in India. Thus, in spite of the changes... it remains true that traditions, practices and ideas which have long been rendered controversial in India are still in Nepal relatively uncontested parts of everyday life (Gellner 1995:2).

As discussed above, the situation in other South Asian countries is no different. This “blindness” or non-recognition of caste not only implies an absence of contestations of caste but also means no state policies and legal provisions that could enable the marginalized caste groups, the Dalits, to become dignified citizens of their countries. The *mussallis* and *bhils* of Pakistan are perhaps worse off when compared to their counterparts in India. Even when ideas of purity and pollution have weakened in countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan, Dalit groups continue to be on margins of the power structures with very poor representation. Their vulnerability is compounded by factors, such as landlessness, poor housing and employment in low-paying occupations.

Notes

- 1 For example, some scholars stress that the origin of caste system lay in the nature of agrarian production and generous of surplus in early agrarian system (see Klass 1980; Yurlova 1989). Similarly, some others have pointed to primacy of the political in structuring caste hierarchies in India (see Raheja 1988; Quigley, D. 1993)

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