

Caste system worse than apartheid

A most startling and quite horrible discovery was made last year in a town located in central India's dusty hill country. Social scientists from Delhi learned there was a hitherto unknown caste of people who lived in the town's garbage dump.

So lowly was this new caste its members were allowed to leave the dump only in the dead of night. Their sole occupation, aside from picking over garbage, was to wash the clothing of the town's Untouchable caste.

The world's most widespread, systematic practice of apartheid — and some of the year's worst racial rioting — has occurred not in South Africa but in India, where the Hindu caste system still keeps tens of millions in social, economic and political bondage.

India's 2,000-year-old caste system segregates people by descent and occupation. In Hindu Vedic law, caste defines morality, regulates human endeavor and is a vital part of the cycle of reincarnation.

Originally, there were four castes. On top were Brahmins, fair-skinned priests and scholars, descendants of white Aryan invaders. This elite caste has ruled Hindu India with few exceptions for two millennia. Beneath them were soldier, tradesman and servant castes. Today the system has divided and subdivided like some terrible social cancer, producing more than 3,000 castes and subgroups.

Hindus are born into a specific caste, marry within it and remain within it for their lives. Political parties, social groups, employment, all are defined — and reserved by caste. Fair-skinned Indians from the north



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rule the nation while dark-skinned Dravidian Indians perform its menial toil.

No movement between castes was possible until recently. At the bottom of this racial pyramid are India's tens of millions of Untouchables. According to Hindu belief, they are being punished for sins in some past existence. Untouchables, also called Harijan, are forbidden to touch people of higher caste — or even to allow their shadows to fall on their betters.

Harijan may not drink at higher caste wells, nor walk the same roads, touch the person, clothing or utensils of better castes. They may neither breathe the air nor take the light from their superiors. Higher castes coming into contact with Untouchables become unclean and must undergo ritual purification. In effect, this system has turned India into a gigantic prison where people are condemned to lives of wretched toil and serfdom. It is a slavery enforced not by the whip but by religion, custom and superstition. Mahatma Gandhi and all governments of India have made varying efforts to stamp out the caste system. The Indian Constitution made caste illegal in 1950. In spite of these efforts, caste still holds much of India in its grip. The system has broken down

in the large cities, but among India's 500 million rural dwellers, caste is still a potent and widely-observed force.

There, Untouchables subsist as a permanently exploited class of modern slaves. Their prime function is to sweep excrement deposited on streets by animals and humans. Most are landless and homeless, sleeping in streets or wasteland. Many Indians, even city dwellers, will still not touch them — they have become a pitiful combination of serf and leper.

Unlike South Africa, India does not make apartheid official policy. But no government has managed to break the grip of this racist system: Custom and local politics often defeat good intentions. The government has tried to reserve jobs and programs for Untouchables but this year alone over 1,000 have died in rioting between different castes fighting for a share of these spoils.

We all know by now that black South Africans may not live next to whites or have intercourse with them; but most of us ignore that tens of millions in India still may not walk on a particular road, marry out of their caste or touch their betters. That there subsists an anguished nation of pariahs within India's 750 million people, victims of racial prejudice and economic exploitation, is by and large ignored.

No TV cameras record their silent anguish. The Untouchables have no mediagenic Bishop Tutu to voice their cause. In truth, what TV producer wants to stay in some fleabag hotel in rural India when he can occupy a luxurious suite in Capetown? It's easier to deplore racism when you have good room service.