# **The International Community Should Condemn India's Caste System**

**Author:** [Human Rights Watch](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/advancedSearch.do?method=doSearch&searchType=AdvancedSearchForm&userGroupName=kcls_main&inputFieldNames%5b0%5d=AU&prodId=OVIC&inputFieldValues%5b0%5d=%22Human+Rights+Watch%22)

More than 240 million people in South Asia live a precarious existence, shunned by much of society because of their ranks as [untouchables](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true) or Dalits at the bottom of a rigid caste system. Dalits are discriminated against, denied access to land, forced to work in slave-like conditions, and routinely abused, even killed, at the hands of the police and of higher-caste groups that enjoy the state's protection.

Dalits in India may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes. They may not use the same wells, visit the same temples and churches, drink from the same cups in tea stalls, or lay claim to land that is legally theirs. Dalit children are frequently made to sit in the back of classrooms, and communities as a whole are made to perform degrading rituals in the name of caste. Dalit women are frequent victims of sexual abuse.

In what has been called Asia's hidden apartheid, entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. Caste-based abuse is also prevalent in [Nepal](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true), Sri Lanka, [Bangladesh](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true), [Pakistan](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true), [Japan](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true), and several African states.

THE SITUATION

Over 100,000 cases of rape, murder, arson, and other atrocities against Dalits are reported in India each year. Given that Dalits are both reluctant and unable (for lack of police cooperation) to report crimes against themselves, the actual number of abuses is presumably much higher.

India's own agencies have reported that these cases are typically related to attempts by Dalits to defy the social order, or demand minimum wages and their basic human rights. Many of the atrocities are committed by the police. Even perpetrators of large-scale massacres have escaped prosecution.

An estimated forty million people in India, among them fifteen million children, are bonded laborers, working in slave-like conditions in order to pay off a debt. A majority of them are Dalits.

According to government statistics, an estimated one million Dalits are manual scavengers who clear feces from public and private latrines and dispose of dead animals; unofficial estimates are much higher.

The sexual slavery of Dalit girls and women continues to receive religious sanction. Under the devadasi system, thousands of Dalit girls in India's southern states are ceremoniously dedicated or married to a deity or to a temple. Once dedicated, they are unable to marry, forced to become prostitutes for upper-caste community members, and eventually auctioned into an urban brothel.

DEVELOPMENTS

Since the early 1990s, violence against Dalits has escalated dramatically in response to a growing Dalit rights movement.

Although untouchability was abolished under India's constitution in 1950, and numerous laws have since been enacted to tackle caste-related problems of bonded labor, manual scavenging, devadasi [forced temple prostitution], and other atrocities against Dalit community members, much of the legislation remains completely unenforced. Laws are openly flouted and state complicity in attacks on Dalit communities has become a well-documented pattern.

In December 1999, the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights—a grassroots movement of Indian human rights groups in fourteen states—collectively submitted over 2.5 million signatures to the Indian prime minister demanding the abolishment of untouchability and urging U.N. bodies to squarely address the issue of caste-based abuse and [discrimination](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true).

Numerous U.N. treaty bodies have called on the Indian government to improve the situation of Dalits. The [United Nations](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true) Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has clearly stated that the situation of Dalits falls within the scope of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and that the term descent contained in Article 1 of the Convention does not refer solely to race, and encompasses the situation of Dalits.

Activists from around the world, including anti-apartheid activists in South Africa and African-American activists in the [United States](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true), have already begun to support the Dalit struggle.

The Indian government has consistently attempted to sabotage the efforts of Indian nongovernment organizations (NGOs) to raise awareness of the caste struggle at preparatory meetings in the lead-up to the World Conference on [Racism](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true) (WCAR). The situation of Dalits stands alone as the only issue to have been systematically cut out of the conference's intergovernmental process so far.

NEXT STEPS

India and other concerned governments should enact and/or enforce legislation to abolish caste-based discrimination, and where applicable, caste-related practices of untouchability, bonded labor, manual scavenging, and the devadasi system.

Concerned governments should also extend invitations to the Special Rapporteur on racism to investigate caste-based discrimination and other forms of discrimination based on descent in their respective countries.

All nations should ensure that caste-based and similar discrimination against marginalized populations in Asia and Africa is explicitly addressed in the draft declaration and programme of action of the WCAR.

Dalits, Burakumin in Japan, and other populations in similar situations should be explicitly acknowledged as groups of people who have been subject to perennial and persistent forms of discrimination and abuse on the basis of their descent.

"[Caste](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true): Asia's Hidden Apartheid," www.hrw.org, 2001. Copyright © 2001 by [Human Rights Watch](https://go-gale-com.ezproxy.kcls.org/ps/retrieve.do?tabID=Viewpoints&resultListType=RESULT_LIST&searchResultsType=MultiTab&searchType=BasicSearchForm&currentPosition=1&docId=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&docType=Viewpoint+essay&sort=Relevance&contentSegment=ZXAY-MOD1&prodId=OVIC&contentSet=GALE%7CEJ3010253223&searchId=R1&userGroupName=kcls_main&inPS=true). Reproduced by permission.