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New India study finds Untouchability pervasive across public and private life

Largest study ever conducted of practices of caste-based discrimination against “dalits” widespread untouchability practiced across Gujarat.

(Washington, DC January 27, 2010)—Caste-based discrimination against *Dalits*, the community referred to as “untouchables”, continues to penetrate numerous aspects of daily life in India. This is the main finding of a new report released today by the Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice and Human Rights (RFK) and Navsarjan Trust entitled *Understanding Untouchability: A Comprehensive Study of Practices and Conditions*. This study, the largest data gathering effort to date on the topic, was conducted on 1589 villages with 5462 respondents in Gujarat, the westernmost state in India.

As found, the 83-page report addresses a wide variety of untouchability practices such as the segregation of housing, drinking water wells, places of religious worships, and separate sitting arrangement in schools and public events by touchable and untouchable caste continues to be nearly universally practiced despite national laws banning such actions. The report outlines a pattern of persistent discrimination not only against *Dalits* by members of non-*Dalit* castes (“vertical” discrimination), but even between sub-castes of *Dalits* (“horizontal” discrimination). Using three years of intensive research, the study outlines a framework for quantifying a diverse range of human rights abuses against *Dalits*, producing data and analysis surpassing all previous examinations of the issue.

The report was envisioned by 2000 RFK Human Rights Laureate Martin Macwan and RFK Global Advocacy Team members, including Dr. Christian Davenport, Professor at the Kroc Institute of the University of Notre Dame, Dr. Allan Stam at the University of Michigan and Dr. David Armstrong at the University of Wisconsin.

“*Understanding Untouchability* is crucial to ending untouchability. *Dalits* face discrimination and violence in every aspect of their lives. By lifting the veil of ignorance, we have no excuse not to end it”, said Martin Macwan, founder of the Navsarjan Trust and 2000 RFK Human Rights Award Laureate.

“The study provides not only new data but a framework for unpacking the complexities of untouchability in particular but discrimination in general. We hope this new approach will help bring the development of solutions within the grasp of government officials, activists, religious institutions and all of society,” said Dr. Christian Davenport, a co-author of the study and Professor of Peace Studies, Political Science and Sociology at Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute.

For millennia, the practice of untouchability has relegated a sector of Indian society to a life marked by humiliation and indignity. These practices were sanctioned by the dominant religion in India, Hinduism, in its most important texts (e.g., the Vedas and Manusmriti). Legally, the practices were abolished by the Constitution of India and subsequent legislation, including the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1976 and the Prevention of Atrocity Act, 1989, punishes those non-*Dalits* who continue this discrimination. Regardless, the topic continues to be one of the most politically divisive issues in the country.

“Caste-based discrimination is the most complex human rights issue facing India today. It is our hope that these findings will provide critical information for the *Dalit* movement to shape its interventions, for the government of India to seriously and systematically examine as well as address its own gaps in ending discrimination, and for the international community to apply similar approaches to ending discrimination globally,” said Monika Kalra Varma, Director of the RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights.

“This study provides advocates with the information they need to see strengths and weaknesses in the current laws protecting the human rights of *Dalits*. The continued prevalence of these demeaning and hateful practices across all communities shows that the legal system is failing to address untouchability, including between the *Dalit* sub-castes, and the time for action is now”, maintains Manjula Pradeep, Executive Director of Navsarjan Trust.

To read the full report or to find additional background materials, [click here](#).

The Navsarjan Trust is an organization that promotes the rights of *Dalits*, the “untouchable” caste of Indian society. *Dalits* face discrimination at almost every level: from access to education and medical facilities to restrictions on where they can live and what jobs they can have. Navsarjan is one of the leading organizations in the advancement of *Dalit* rights.

The Robert F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights (RFK Center) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the human rights movement through long-term partnerships with courageous human rights defenders around the world. Since 2000, the RFK Center has worked with Martin Macwan, beginning a long-term partnership to address the issue of untouchability.