

THE LEGITIMATION OF PREJUDICE

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Abstract

India is an icon of culture; harboring families with deep ancestry, towns with rich history, and beliefs unwavering by western influence. As our nation develops, the mindset of the population, however, rejects change. The danger arises when people have begun to place higher respect to myths over facts, basing life decisions solely on unsolidified arguments from support by righteous leaders. With over 30% of the population illiterate, unawareness due to a lack of education remains one of the biggest issues (Hunter). Our continuous refusal to reject discrimination, poorly adapted values, and fact less beliefs are the biggest hindrances to development.

Keywords: *discrimination, government, caste system, gender roles, female infanticide, constitution, conditioned belief.*

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The innocent cries of a newborn fill the room as the new mother meets her baby for the first time. The fruits of her labor are safely swaddled in her arms as a cautious audience waits for the news. As the nurse comes out holding the baby, the excitement, anticipation, and prayer end abruptly. Disappointment falls across the room in a wave and the mood dims. It's a girl. "Oh well" they think, "maybe next time" they say to one another as they exit the hospital. Most times the girl is raised, chastised for existing as a burden. Other times, she's discarded in a trash bin, set afire, or inhumanly placed in the river as if she were a paper boat and not an infant. Female infanticide prevails in India despite efforts by the government. In the year 2000, the University of Delhi recorded the 91 known cases of Indian female infanticide (Sahni). Through bigotry these laws are ignored, mindsets unchanged, and rational thought scarce. For women in India, discrimination begins in the womb. Women often undergo abortions after being told that the gender of their baby is female. The problem became so prominent that hospitals rarely give out the gender of a baby. In rural areas especially, doctors and practice most often keep the gender of the baby private until birth. In 1996, The Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) (PNDT) Act that made antenatal sex determination and sex selective abortion illegal came into effect. This was one of the few counter measures placed into effect by the government. The effect of this act was a significant decrease in abortion rates, however, it didn't prevent infanticide which occurs after birth (Sahni).

This ideology has been taken for granted; girls are lesser than boys. The typical mindset is that the boy will carry the last name, support his parents, and not have to be designated a dowry. These gender roles are what prevent most Indian from recognizing the equality among genders. Even with vast developments only 27% of women either had a job or were in search of one ("Women"). India is a nation that is praised for its rich culture, yet that same culture seems to be so traditional that hinders our development. In compliance to culture, most women remain at home and complete menial household chores. Though education rates have significantly increased, this has become a vantage point for marriages rather than a step towards a career path. Women are not less than men because they have the ability to become mothers, they are not unworthy or a burden. We have the ability to create new life and should not be reprimanded by old traditions for it. As a nation, we can't keep relying on stereotypes, we must learn to change.

Our most accepted form of discrimination lies within the structure of India's functionality, embedded in our history from 1500 BCE. The caste system was originally put in place by the Aryans delegate all the jobs needed for a society to run effectively. Most of us familiar with the basic divisions of the caste system, however, over time it has gotten much more complex with the addition of sub castes. Regardless, two levels remain consistent; the highest class and the lowest class. The Brahmins hold the priestly position of all jobs pertaining to religion. They are met with an unquestioned loyalty and the utmost of respect. The lowest class; Dalits are treated with the utmost disrespect. They are in charge of sanitary work, road cleaning, etc. Many people consider them lower than the caste system, undeserving of anything. Given the name untouchables, they are deemed worthless by the Indian society. As the name suggests, it is against the social norm to touch anyone from this caste. The system was supposedly dismantled by the Indian constitution under Article 15 of prohibiting discrimination based on caste. Furthermore Article 17 declared untouchability illegal and then later in 1955 the Untouchability Offences Act meant to protect everyone's civil rights and establish punishment for practicing untouchability. To say the very least, these laws haven't worked. Discrimination exists among different castes and is exacerbated when it comes to Dalits. These unlucky victims stand as one of the most oppressed groups in the world ("World").

We continue to see the effects of this system as inter caste marriages are frowned upon, Dalits faces daily rights violations, and the inequivalent success of Brahmins in society. The world Dalit translates to English as "broken people". In the 21st century we still lines drawn in rural villages that Dalits are prohibited from crossing. Victims of an inane system they're treated so horrendously that the government tried again in 1976 by passing The Prevention of Atrocities Act. The goes as following, "The act prohibits any of the following on an SC/ST person...putting an inedible object into the mouth of an SC/STperson...forcibly removing the clothes of a person". In summation, the act prohibits parading people naked through the streets, forcing them to eat feces, taking away their land, messing with their water, and burning down their homes. The act makes us painfully aware of crimes that are commonly committed against innocent people. Knowing what happens, most people still turn a blind eye. GuruswamyGurruammal was a pregnant twenty-six-year-old woman who was forcefully taken to an officer during a village raid.To escape the situation, she told the tax collector who has just arrived. In retaliation, the police dragged her out of her home in the morning. An old woman who attempted to protest the action was also severely beaten. She was arrested and brought to station naked. Stayed there for twenty-five days, baby miscarried 10th day (Narula). This is only one of the many human right crimes investigated by the UN. In India, these people have essentially no rights and continue to struggle as one of the largest repressed groups.

India is a nation of success and unequivocal growth, yet we still see ourselves as the country on the Human Rights Watch for crimes against humanity. Injustices against girls and untouchables represent a mere portion of oppressed groups, injustices we fight against every day. One reason we can't move forward is due to the fact that people can't stand when their conditioned belief is questioned. Feeling attacked and defensive, the other perspective is refused to be taken into account. India is a country built upon religion, tradition, and culture. Long held traditions which can be accredited to our country's long history stand strong and the words of elders are followed like orders. Their statements are rarely questioned. Though many believe this is an act of respect, it has led to a domino of negative effects. Including the acceptance of myths and blind beliefs as facts, justified through tradition and elders. These ideas have been held with such unwavering confidence that it has become dangerous. It is believed that disabled persons committed crimes in their previous life and are therefore symbols of bad luck. Thus, there have been numerous cases in which they have been killed to "purify" a community (Nilika). To realize that this is unjust and meaningless will take a long time for people to come to terms with. Support from popular figureheads through various media prevents people to voice support against it. Reforms such as Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016 passed by the government. Ultimately, reform depends on the willingness of people to accept change.

The way government handles situations that are in the public eye varies drastically from a lesser known case. Putting on a mask, it seems as if they operate on a hidden apartheid with laws masking the true reality. Complaint or violations against Dalits are ignored and unregistered, a result of a bias. Though the laws are written with the constitution, it seems that their only purpose is for them to be written down. The words are stripped of their power. The government doesn't have much opposition to this because Dalits have no voice, no support. The police officers are just one of many examples, as Indian culture and beliefs align with the discrimination. Laws aren't supported by the majority of people so the government feels no pressure to back them up. Just the existence of laws has had no effect, the laws need to be enforced. Most of people would agree that their discrimination is warranted. Unknowingly a path for prejudice has been paved, but it can that be blocked through the power of education and government.

These issues are so complex and intertwined in our history that there are no surefire solutions. Our biggest issue lies within the way we are raised; to never question, only to follow our elders. Though older doesn't necessarily mean smarter, we continue to operate this way. Inquiry and questioned should not be seen as a sign of disrespect, but rather encouraged. Curiosity is our natural learning instinct and we should not create a society that moves towards discarding it. Change is encouraged by curiosity and we need to create an environment that supports this. Currently, we are the country with the highest

rate illiteracy. Through education and executive action to support laws we can move towards a collective society of progressive thinking. A society where women are not discriminated, the caste system is finally dismantled, and everyone is treated with humanity. Change can only be implemented by the government, but to carry it out successfully it requires support and encouragement from people.

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