

Continuity and Change in ASIA

Join us every Wednesday for an insightful look at *Continuity and Change in Asia*, a social studies-based program exploring political and social issues shaping Asia today and designed to encourage students to better understand the various issues shaping the countries and regions of East, South and Southeast Asia. This Newspapers In Education program is in partnership with the Asia Outreach Centers at the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies. Series will run through Wednesday, June 7, 2006.

Activities

- Spend some time thinking about discrimination. There are many different ways in which people are discriminated against – some may not be as obvious as others (as illustrated in this week's article).

In The Seattle Times, locate an article that covers some aspect of discrimination. Summarize the article and then present it to your class along with some solutions that you think might help to make the situation better.

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ARTICLE 7

Emerging Voices

The Challenges of Democracy in Modern India

By Craig Jeffrey, Assistant Professor of Geography and International Studies, University of Washington

When India gained independence from Britain in 1947, the untouchable (now called Dalits) caste hero, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar, said that the nation would lead a double life. On the one hand, people would possess laws and democratic freedoms that would be the envy of the world. But, in the social and economic sphere, people would continue to face discrimination and hardship. Since the early 1990s, this double life has become clearer than ever, particularly for India's untouchables/Dalits.

Dalits form the lowest rung in the Indian caste hierarchy. Historically, they were confined to jobs which Hindus considered polluting, such as sweeping up and carrying dung. Higher castes commonly believed that their spiritual purity would suffer if they came into physical contact with Dalits, who were therefore forced to live on the edge of the village. Dalits were excluded from most public institutions and were compelled to work for higher castes in exploitative conditions.

Since independence, the Indian government has tried to improve Dalits' position in society by offering them reserved positions in educational institutions and salaried work. Today caste discrimination is illegal and there are several political parties representing Dalits.

But have Dalits really improved their social position? A focus on the individual lives of Dalit young people offers a way to answer this question.

Bright, confident and ambitious, Sonu was studying for a master's degree in the North Indian city of Meerut. He was typical of a large number of Dalits in North India, whose families have managed to save enough money for their sons to acquire formal education. Sonu also formed part of a broad group of self-styled "new politicians" (*naye netas*), who represented the interests of Dalits. These new politicians were mainly men from relatively prosperous Dalit families. In some cases, these politicians had formed small Dalit political organizations in Meerut City, but they usually worked on their own.

Sonu's political work was typical of that of the new politicians. Sonu had fought to get more Dalits into the university. He had also appealed to the vice-chancellor of the university to have an Ambedkar statue built on campus. Outside the university, Sonu campaigned to stop the bullying of Dalits in local schools, helped two Dalits who had been injured in a bus crash and lobbied for Dalits to get better treatment from the police. Sonu also acted as a go-between for his wider community. He often returned to his village to advise other Dalits about educational or job opportunities. He came back to the village before elections to explain the policies of different political parties.

But Sonu said that his poverty, relative to higher castes, was constantly undermining his political work and quest for respect. Although richer than most other Dalits, Sonu could not afford to pay the bribe required to obtain a secure job. Sonu complained that higher castes pay government officials to give them posts formally reserved for lower castes.

Sonu lamented: "For people like me, life is a constant battle. I just don't know what my future will be!" Sonu also said that, because higher castes are richer than lower castes, they continue to look down upon Dalits: "They make snide comments about us or laugh at us behind our backs!"

Sonu's story provides a means of understanding one of the most powerful contradictions of modern India. Dalits have come to obtain political power in North India. They have better access to power and are keenly aware of their rights. People like Sonu are able to freely express their views, organize radical political demonstrations on campus and try to change the way the government and the university are run. Sonu's friends and relatives in his village feel connected to the political life of India in a way they did not 10 years ago. But Sonu leads a life marked by poverty and frustration. He is unemployed and his family remains poor.

What is required for Dalits to truly transform their situation? A redistribution of resources in society must be part of the answer. Better government might also help. But such solutions seem far off. In the meantime, even better-off Dalits like Sonu often feel isolated, helpless and frustrated.

Questions for discussion:

- Who are the Dalits and why are they discriminated against?
- What is the "double life" the author refers to? Describe the condition of Dalits today.
- What policies are in place to help Dalits? Citing evidence from the article, do you consider these policies successful or not?



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