

# **The Changing Horizons of Politics in a Network Society – the Dalit Case**

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This paper has as its starting point a journey to Mumbai, India to attend the World Social Forum (WSF) in January 2004. The WSF is a recent political invention, a global venue and space which civil society organizations and movements can call their own. The WSF represents one type of globalization, one in opposition to neo-liberal globalization.

At the heart of globalization defined by Held, *et. al.*, is:

A process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions ... generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power. (16)

Prominent among the more than 100,000 daily participants at the WSF were the Dalits from across India, formerly known as “untouchables.” The Dalits took full advantage of the WSF to draw attention to themselves by means of spectacle – banners, marches, and drumming – and by the large number of Forum panels and workshops they participated in.

The Dalits adeptly used the open space to protest against casteism, denial of human rights, and the debilitating effects of privatization upon the state. Clearly evident was a global-local pattern of interaction by Dalit organizations attempting to publicize their cause in a global venue, albeit one staged in a particular place and time. The Dalit interventions at the WSF were an excellent reminder of the dynamic between the global and the local, space and place. While the global matters so does place (and history) and both have left their imprint on the social movements of India, the Dalits being one example. One cannot understand why the Dalits have moved to global venues unless one knows more about where they come from.

This paper represents then an attempt to understand the local contexts which underlie the Dalit movement and its decision to create advocacy networks beyond the borders of India. However, it does not centre on the WSF and the Dalits, but rather on their earlier efforts to publicize and promote their struggle against caste discrimination at various United Nations venues including a global venue, the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa in September 2001. This is a continuing campaign, one much longer, more complex, and intense than current engagements with the WSF. It is a dynamic campaign that is being waged on a variety of levels, from the panchayati raj (village councils) to the Indian states, to the central government in New Delhi, and beyond India, transnationally (where Canada plays a part), internationally at the UN and finally, globally at the WCAR.

The Dalit campaign highlights the janus-faced nature of globalization. That is, while globalization can disempower people, and thus can be seen as a threat, it simultaneously can empower the most marginalized groups who increasingly are acquiring the capacity to project themselves and their causes beyond their borders. All this in an attempt to transform the politics of place, in this case, India.

The first part of the paper concerns itself with a number of related theoretical concerns. It initially discusses the relationship between the global and the local with a focus on the centrality of networks as a link between the global and the local. It then discusses how political opportunity structures at the domestic and international level influence the strategies of social movements. Given the centrality of the “local”, “place”, and the “domestic” it is also important to understand some of the dynamics of social movements within an Indian context.

Once this stage has been set the paper then considers the nature of the Dalit movement itself and the decision to internationalize their human rights struggle at the United Nations and subsequently in terms of the UN sponsored WCAR. Taking the Dalit cause beyond the Indian state illustrates the desire and need of Dalits to create public spaces in which to highlight their causes and to give voice to the voiceless. The paper concludes addressing the question of what difference has internationalizing the Dalit cause made, among the Dalits, within India and at the UN.

### **Globalization, Networking and the Local**

Initially globalization was portrayed one-dimensionally as the triumph of space over place. For example, Caroline Thomas argued that the concept of globalization “refers broadly to the process where power is located in global social formations and expressed through global networks rather than through territorially-based states.” (In Steger, 30)

While most other analysts do not go so far as to foresee the end of the relevance of states, nonetheless, territory and place are often marginalized in their analyses. According to social theorists such as Manuel Castells, the “space of places” (territory, place, locality) are being subordinated to a “space of flows” – of commodities, capital, technology, ideas and culture across national boundaries. Both power and function are becoming organized in a space of flows. Thus, according to Castells, “the dominant tendency is towards a horizon of networked, ahistorical space of flows, aiming at imposing its logic over scattered, segmented places, increasingly unrelated to each other, less and less able to share cultural codes.” (Vol. 1, 428)

This has considerable consequence for agency. According to Harvey groups opposed to globalization are better able “to command place better than space.” (Harvey in Dirlik, 19) In Harvey’s words oppositional groups “are relatively empowered to organize in place but dis-empowered when it comes to organizing over space.” (19)

Viewed from this perspective a one-sided optics of globalization emerges with the global becoming the dominant unit of analysis to the relative exclusion of place and territory. In recent years, however, there has been a growing awareness of how messy, complex and contradictory globalization is. (Kellner) Other analysts reject the notion of place as static and bounded. Doreen Massey, for example, sees place as “open and porous networks of social relations.” (Massey in Rosenau, 80) According to Massey places are produced through social contestation and are inseparable from globalization in its various manifestations – trade, finance, production, migration, and social movements. Place thus has a dynamic, interactive relationship with the global. Building upon Massey Laura Chernaik insists that:

Harvey’s expression, ‘place-bound’ is quite misleading; local practices are not bound to place but are potentially possible to articulate through space, globally. The form that this global articulation takes, though, is more often a network than a system; a coalition of specific, different groups rather than a universalization of any one political identity. (In Dirlik, 20)

In this perspective networks provide the bridge by which the global and place are linked thus facilitating a complex relationship between the two. James Rosenau comes to much the same conclusion arguing, for example, that a focus solely on the global occludes as much as it reveals. Rather, he argues:

Globalization is but one component of the transformative dynamics that underlie the emergence of a new epoch in the human condition. It is, to be sure, a major component, but all too many analyses suffer from treating it as the primary component and thus risk underplaying the complexity of the emergent epoch. (8)

There is a need, for example, to recognize that localization (place) is also a powerful force at work throughout the world.

Moreover, argues Rosenau, the two are inseparable, “there can be no global without the local.” (85) Rosenau refers to two expressions “distant proximities” and “framegration” to capture the complex interplay between globalization and localization, and the integrative and disintegrative forces at play in world affairs.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, claims Rosenau:

Locating distant proximities at the center of our perspectives on politics enables us to avoid the disciplinary trap of maintaining an analytic separation between foreign and domestic politics, as is the case when international politics and comparative politics are treated as different fields of inquiry with each holding constant the dynamics at work in the other. (5)

Like Chernaik, Rosenau agrees on the centrality of networks as a link between the global and the local. Importantly, the spread of horizontal networks can be viewed as “serving to restructure the underpinnings of world affairs.” (62)

According to Rosenau networks symbolize the world explosion in connectivity between organizations. Although networks are known for “voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange” as organizations they do have structure. (Keck and Sikkink, 8) Commonly networks are “defined as a set of organizational arrangements midway between horizontal coordination (markets) and vertical coordination (hierarchies.” (Courchene in Rosenau, 59) In addition, as Hardtmann notes, networks are highly elastic, “they may be stretched out over vast geographical distances, or rapidly reduced for narrower situations.” (24)

Thus networks can traverse a broad range of organizational relationships from face-to-face relations to the local, regional, national and beyond. The Dalits, as we shall see, have proven adept at moving across this entire spectrum of local to global politics. As such networks can serve as catalysts of empowerment and agency from below for marginalized groups and social movements.

While networks can take a variety of forms the focus here is on “advocacy networks” that work beyond national borders. For Keck and Sikkink advocacy networks “plead the causes of others or defend a cause or proposition. They are organized to promote causes, principled ideas and norms.” (8,9) Of critical importance “networks are communicative structures” and “political spaces in which differently situated actors negotiate – formally or informally – the social, cultural, and political means of their joint enterprise.” (31)

In a network world with its dynamic interaction between the domestic and the international environment, advocacy networks also have a greater range of political opportunity structures in which they can operate. These structures may include domestic institutions, international institutions or institutions in civil society. Keck and Sikkink offer one example whereby international opportunity structures provide an outlet for nonstate domestic actors faced with repression and blockage at home can “bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring persuasion on their states from outside.” (12) This is a tactic commonly used by human rights advocacy networks to place their issues on the international agenda. In a later work Sikkink, in collaboration with Khagram and Riker, acknowledges that while “repression is the most obvious form of blockage ... a lack of responsiveness may also compel groups to work internationally”

among them feminist groups and indigenous peoples. (Khagram, Riker, Sikkink, 19) This is important in so far as it acknowledges that even in democratic regimes groups may feel frustrated by unresponsive state and societal structures.

Sikkink also refined the analysis of interaction between domestic and international opportunity structures by formulating the concept of a “spiral model.” Whereas the boomerang model suggested that advocacy networks engage in a single move, the spiral model involved a series of political moves over time designed to help create a more open domestic opportunity structure. (Sikkink, 2004) This is clearly applicable to the Dalits.

Just as domestic political opportunity structures may vary and have greater or lesser degrees of openness, so too may international opportunity structures. The United Nations and its related institutions, for example, provide for relatively open opportunity structures permitting nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to have consultative status, to speak and make presentations at meetings, and place written materials on the record. This is particularly true in the area of human rights. This helps to explain, as we shall see, why the UN became such an attractive venue for the Dalit movement.

### **Globalization and Social Movements within the Indian Context**

For most Indian social movements globalization has been perceived negatively, as an imposition, as primarily an external economic force. Neo-liberal globalization, or as it is commonly referred to in India, “Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization”, arrived in 1991 in the form of the New Economic Policy of Prime Minister Narishma Rao when India opened the market for foreign products and companies. Until then the state had been a decisive actor in the Indian economy since 1947.

For most social movements in India, particularly new social movements, globalization represented a threat, the latest chapter in Western imperialism and capitalist expansion, and had to be resisted. For the Dalits it represented both a threat and an opportunity to globalize their plight by actively networking from India or through overseas supporters. (Ahmed) For the Dalits globalization threatened the limited gains they had secured through the state, including anti-discriminatory measures such as reserved employment in the state (affirmative action) as well as the state's welfare role which was being eroded by privatization.

The Dalit and non-Dalit social movements drew upon distinct intellectual traditions. According to Gail Omvedt “most of the social movements today draw upon the ideologies that originated in nineteenth century India ... Gandhism ... and the Dalit ideology of the anti-caste movement.” (2003:125,126) Today, outside of India, perhaps the best know exemplar of these Neo-Gandhian ideas is the eco-feminist Vandana Shiva. Shiva's website makes explicit her indebtedness to Gandhi. For example, her lecture before the Gandhi Peace Foundation in January 2004, “The Spinning Wheel and the Seed: Gandhi's legacy, Humanity's Hope,” pays tribute to Gandhi in her struggle against globalization:

Gandhi Lives – as a perennial source of inspiration and political motivation to defend our freedoms. Globalization as a project is a plan to extinguish all freedoms of people through total control of trade, technology and property rights. ... Globalization is often presented as a process of new interconnections between societies. However, if it is geographical, it is about the global reach of giant corporations – not about a global joining of the hearts of people worldwide.

Shiva concludes her lecture by underscoring the continuing relevance of Gandhi's ideas:

Gandhi's creative vision of swadeshi [self-reliance, protectionism], swaraj [self-rule], satyagraha [non-violent resistance], and sarvodaya [welfare of all] inspires us to build living economies and living democracies. In his legacy we find hope,

we find freedom, we find our creativity.  
 ([http://www.navdanya.org/news/gandhi\\_pf.php](http://www.navdanya.org/news/gandhi_pf.php))

Shiva's vision, like Gandhi's, is clearly grounded in a vision of local empowerment. Gandhi emphasized de-centralization, the traditional village as a self-contained republic, social harmony, and anti-secularism, sentiments that many new social movements in India share.

### **The Dalit Movement**

While Gandhi's ideas underwrite the activities of most social movements in India the Dalit Movement today rejects Gandhism in favour of another towering figure in Indian history, the Dalit, Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956). For Dalits Ambedkar is a source of immense pride and respect, not for only his remarkable educational achievements – two doctorates, one from the London School of Economics, the other from Columbia University – but also for his leadership against untouchability, Hinduism, and his role as a founder of the modern Indian state. Today, Ambedkar serves not only as an inspiration for the Dalit movement but also as a source of legitimacy for actions including fighting casteism not only internally but externally.

In comparison with Gandhi Ambedkar is a study in contrast. (See Appendix A) Whereas Gandhi dressed in the simple garb of the peasant Ambedkar's portrait – projected everywhere in India where Dalits reside – is of a modern man, an important man, with glasses, suit and tie and, in some portraits, with a copy of a book in his hand which represents the Constitution of India and Ambedkar as a contributor to the nation. It is an image according to Zelliott, "that says 'education to the literate and the illiterate alike.'" (136) In philosophical terms whereas Gandhi saw the world in terms of harmony, Ambedkar saw it in terms of contradictions, the most pre-eminent being the caste system

although those of capitalism and class were also critical. In this sense Ambedkar is a precursor to the postmodern criticism of Marxist claims that class is the principle source of oppression. Ambedkar felt that culture and ideology must be seen as sources of oppression and that caste trumped class as a source of oppression. Ambedkar was a committed socio-economic egalitarian and an internationalist whereas Gandhi was oriented to the traditional village.

Ambedkar's hostility to caste is exemplified in a historic quarrel with Gandhi in the 1930s in this regard. In terms of caste Gandhi was an opponent of untouchability but he did not want to abolish the varna system, only reform it. According to Gandhi the untouchables could be added to the four fold varna system of Hinduism. These four varnas were the Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (servants). Outside of the varna system, and, therefore, polluted, were the untouchables. Gandhi felt the untouchables, who he called "Harijans" – men of God – could be incorporated within the varna system (Hardtmann). In effect, Gandhi saw untouchability as an aberration within Hinduism and through a change of heart and mind by the "higher" (dominant) castes it could be rooted out. Ambedkar, on the other hand, felt untouchability was not an aberration of Hinduism but was inextricably bound up with it and could not be rooted out as simply as Gandhi implied, a judgement that has proven historically accurate. Whereas Gandhi was willing to accept the hierarchical varna system for Ambedkar caste was a "monster." Caste was everywhere, blocking the path of Dalit advancement at every turn, and, according to Ambedkar "you cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill the monster [of caste]" (As quoted in Nanda, 192) At the end of his life he demonstrated his contempt for Hinduism

by converting to Buddhism interpreting Buddhism as a rational, “modernistic, ‘liberation theology.’” (Omvedt, 2001:147)

While most Dalits have not followed Ambedkar’s conversion to Buddhism, it is true that Dalits “have been extraordinarily hostile to Gandhi” (Elliot, 137) and today, “anti-Gandhism is one theme that permeates the Dalit discourse in various contexts.” (Hardtmann, 111) Elliot asks the question of why Gandhi should be so disliked when for most non-Dalits Gandhi is the one leader most responsible for bringing the plight of the untouchables to the consciousness of India. Her response is as follows:

I think the answer to this is quite simple. Gandhi’s ‘Harijan’ is an object of pity. Compassion also, but also pity. Ambedkar’s ‘Dalit’ is a man or woman filled with pride and self-respect. Social movements thrive on pride. The multifaceted Dr. Ambedkar stands for both qualities, pride and self-respect. (Elliot, 137)

It is this pride and respect and desire for socio-economic equality and recognition, that drive the disparate elements of the Dalit movement and their self-identification with the term Dalits (oppressed.) Whatever their differences “all Dalits, irrespective of creed, caste, and political affiliation consider Ambedkar their leader.” (Shah, 24)

Ambedkar casts a huge shadow not only over the Dalit movement but India itself. He is, with Nehru, considered a “co-inventor of India” although it is Ambedkar who has been described “as the principal author of the Constitution.” (Corbridge and Harriss, 23) Ambedkar’s imprint on the Indian constitution is clear in its many clauses intended to protect the human rights of the Dalits and improve their social welfare and education. Article 17 abolishes “Untouchability” and forbids its practice in any form. Article 335 provides for “reservations”, i.e. affirmative action for “scheduled castes” (Dalits) in terms of government employment.

Ambedkar was fully cognizant that formal constitutional and political rights could not be realized without social and economic equality. On the occasion of the adoption of the Indian constitution he warned:

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognizing the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value.... How long shall we continue to deny equality in our social and economic life? If we continue to deny it for long, we will do so only by putting our political democracy in peril. (Ambedkar in Jayal, 24)

Ambedkar's observation is *apropos* to contemporary India. According to Oommen a prime source of discontent in India today is the "inculcation of values of equality and social justice into an extremely hierarchical society through the agency of Indian constitution." (244)

### **Internationalizing the Dalit Movement**

Today, more than ever Dalit activists are demanding socio-economic equality and the destruction of the caste system. Increasingly frustrated in the arena of representative politics by limited progress the Dalit movement in the 1990s reorganized on a network basis. They widened the basis of their struggle against caste beyond the nation-state, a struggle very much based on the ideas of Ambedkar. In so doing they chose as their primary venues the United Nations and the WCAR.

The move to international advocacy in recent years has been most forcefully spearheaded by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) (<http://www.dalits.org>) founded in 1998. However, this was not the first foray of the Dalits in the international arena not would be it accurate to portray the NCDHR as the first, or only, flag bearer in the international arena fighting casteism. Dalit literature

outlines four phases of the emergence of caste discrimination as an international issue. The first phase, not surprisingly, are Ambedkar's interventions before the British Round Table Conferences in London, 1930-31. In the lead up to independence India leaders met in London in an attempt to find agreement on the key elements of a constitution for an independent India. Ambedkar was adamant that the future constitution had to abolish the practice of untouchability and guarantee the "Depressed Classes" (untouchables) equal citizenship and fundamental rights. For his stance Ambedkar was attacked by many dominant caste leaders for dividing the Independence movement. Not unlike today he was told this was an internal matter, one to be settled after Independence. Today, Ambedkar's intervention is credited for ensuring the formal rights and freedoms to the untouchables in the Indian Constitution. For contemporary Dalit activists Ambedkar's external advocacy of an internal problem set an important precedent, one that provided legitimacy to the internationalization of the Dalit human right's struggle. According to two leading activists in the NCDHR:

Ambedkar showed that boundaries for solutions to the problem of caste discrimination are not to be drawn around the village, district, state or nation. What is an internal solution or an external solution should not be determined by geographic borders or national borders. (Divakar and Ajai M., 18)

The second phase of the internationalizing of the Dalit issue was one of invisibility and transition. In terms of invisibility, one of the leading statements on human rights in the twentieth century, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, to which the Indian government is a signatory, is silent on the issue of caste despite Ambedkar's representation of the case of the untouchables to the UN. (Thorat and Umakant, xxviii, xxix) The UDHR makes no reference to caste as a basis for discrimination focussing as it did on questions of race and colour. This is largely a result

of North American and European dominance at the UN. The emphasis on questions of race and colour as norms became heavily institutionalized at UN institutions becoming significant limitations and constraints within which Dalit activists have had to work.

During the second phase, internationalizing of the Dalit issue was not done so much by Dalits in India but by a transnationally linked Dalit diaspora. During the 1950s and 1960s Dalits began to emigrate, to the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, and a number of other countries. Their numbers are fewer than the much larger numbers of the dominant castes who were able to emigrate and they were often scattered. They kept in touch where they could and during the 1990s the series of networks among themselves and the Dalit movement in India became more extensive “not least due to their communication via the Internet.” (Hardtmann, 150)

Gail Omvedt traces the start of transnational Dalit activism back to the declaration of Emergency in 1975 when Dalits in solidarity with Black Americans mobilized and protested against a visit to the United States by Indira Gandhi. For the first time Americans were hearing stories of Dalit atrocities from what they knew only as the “land of Gandhi.” (Omvedt, 2001a:188) In the U.K. an extensive transnational Dalit movement also began to form. (Hardtmann) About the same time, in Toronto a Dalit small businessman, Yogesh Warshade, founded the Ambedkar Mission which since has developed into a global NGO, the Ambedkar Centre for Justice and Peace. As the ACJP website notes the center “has been globalizing the issues for Dalits ... of India for last 15 years.” (<http://acjp.sts.winis.net>) Since 1991 the ACJP has been appearing in various venues including the Canadian Parliament and at various human rights forums at the

United Nations. Prominent among these forums is the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD).

CERD operates under the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) to which the Indian government is a signatory.

ICERD in 1965 defined the term 'racial discrimination' as:

any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, national or ethnic which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of human life. (As quoted in Thorat and Umakant, xvi)

As is evident the provision does not refer to discrimination to other identities than those listed above.

In August of 1996 Yogesh Verhade was invited by CERD as an observer and to present evidence of Indian atrocities on untouchables and tribal peoples. Verhade was already an accredited participant to the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations in Geneva and where he had been campaigning for the UN to recognize untouchability as a crime against humanity. In 1996 CERD was deliberating on the question of caste discrimination. That CERD had taken this step is due, in part, to pressure from NGOs such as that expressed when a thousand NGOs worldwide attended the UN Vienna Human Rights Summit in June 1993 and pressured the Summit to pass a resolution urging the UN to act. (Press Release, ACJP, October 4, 1996) By 1996 the attitude of the UN on the issue of caste discrimination was in clearly in flux.

In the fall of 1996 CERD harshly criticized the India government of Prime Minister Deve Gowda for the widespread discrimination and abuse of the Scheduled

Castes [Dalits] and tribes [Adivasis]. For the first time a UN body made reference to caste discrimination under the heading ‘descent’:

The Committee states that the term ‘descent’ mentioned in Article 1 of the Convention does not solely refer to race. The Committee affirms that the situation of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes fall within the scope of the Convention. (Quoted in Thorat and Umakant, xvii)

Globally, for all Dalits this was a significant development, the first of several to come.

The ACJP “hailed the move as perhaps the most significant development and an important first step for CERD.” (Press Release, October 4, 1996) In India there was rejoicing in the Dalit movement.

No doubt the UN had proven itself to be an important venue to advance the Dalit cause. Over the next two years the spotlight of the UN and its related institutions began to shine ever more strongly on the Indian government and its poor human rights performance in terms of caste discrimination. For example, in 1997 the UN Special Rapporteur on Racism and Racial Discrimination chastised the Indian government for its unwillingness to be forthcoming to the request for more information concerning the situation of caste discrimination stating:

The Special Rapporteur noted the discrepancy between the facts alleged and the government’s reply and stated that a visit to India would permit him to evaluate the situation in cooperation with the government and the communities concerned. (As quoted in Divakar and Ajai M. 11)

In 2002 another UN body, the Committee for Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) criticized the Indian government on the situation of continuing violence and discrimination against Dalit women.

While the networks of the Dalit diaspora transnationalized the Dalit issue and internationalized it at the UN, it was only in 2001 that the Dalit issue was globalized, at

the WCAR, held in Durban, South Africa in September 2001. While the UN discussion and reports are of great significance it was the WCAR that brought the issue of caste and untouchability-based discrimination to wide public audiences internationally but particularly in India. The WCAR became, in effect, an important means of creating public space in India for the Dalits present by reflecting the controversy over caste-based discrimination back to India igniting a huge internal public debate.

### **The Formation of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights**

By 2001 a global Dalit movement had taken shape, one composed of a variety of networks within India and abroad. While there is no central hub to the Dalit movement in 1998 a key node emerged, the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR). Its name belies the fact that this is an international and global campaign as well. Formation of the NCDHR reflects a growing capacity and confidence within the Dalit movement. Unlike the diasporic networks it is India-based and operates on all levels from the local, to the regional, to the national, transnational, international, and global levels. It is the NCDHR that today has brought the Dalit movement to a new level organizationally taking a leading role in the series of meetings up to the WCAR and after to another significant victory at the UN in 2005.

The events leading up to, and at, WCAR were intense and fiercely contested. However, before I discuss these events it is necessary to discuss the NCDHR as a network organization in terms of its purposes, objectives, organization, and activities. The NCDHR originated in 1998 when, in a response to a call from the United Nations to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Dalit activists met in Bangalore. These activists included people working in a variety of NGOs,

including, prominently, the National Federation of Dalit Women, and other associated Dalit networks consisting of intellectuals, academics, trade unionists, writers, journalists and social workers. Many came from southern India but the campaign extends across the country. (Hardtmann) Underlying the formation of the NCDHR is one primary concern, to publicize the plight of the Dalits at both the national and international levels, the latter with the intent of internationalizing the Dalit issue at the United Nations. (Interview Dalit leader, November 8, 2004) In this regard the NCDHR has proven particularly adept with a keen sense of its audiences and symbolism. For example, it launched its first national campaign on December 10, 1998 (World Human Rights Day) and concluded it on April 14, 1999, April 14 being the birthday of Ambedkar, thus symbolically linking the global and the local.

According to the NCDHR documents the NCDHR has two overarching aims closely linked to its primary concerns of publicity:

- That India and the International Community recognize that Dalit Rights are Human Rights and decide to effectively abolish untouchability.
- To cast out caste so as to build a new, just social order. (NCDHR Presentation, 2003, [www.idsn.org/NCDHR.doc](http://www.idsn.org/NCDHR.doc))

In addition to these aims the NCDHR has laid out a number of objectives that reveal the types and levels of activities it is engaged in. (See Appendix B) These objectives include:

- Creating awareness and support for Dalit Human Rights in civil society
- Strengthening the unity and solidarity of Dalits and Dalit movements worldwide

- Preparing research and status reports in such areas as education, land and labour, gender equality for Dalit women and employment
- “Pressurizing” central (federal) and state governments and other National agencies to give top priority to Dalit Rights
- Pressurizing United Nations bodies and other international organizations to give top priority to Dalit issues
- Highlighting the culture and contribution of Dalit communities to society.

While the NCDHR is organized as a campaign in the international language of human rights it interprets this language in two ways that need underscoring. First, as is evident from its lists of demands the NCDHR’s concerns about human rights go beyond caste-related discrimination and violence, to include cultural, social, economic, and political rights and protections. Second, while it subscribes to the universal language of human rights, it does not view them in Western terms, as individual rights, but rather, as group rights. The campaign’s Charter of Dalit Human Rights makes this pointedly clear:

We are shocked by the fact serious discussions on human rights have been clouded by an excessive focus on individual liberty because of the predominant focus on the individual contemporary Western thinking. An individualism of the type and intensity that is being promoted by the West ... is in sharp contrast to the indigenous people in general and Dalits and tribal peoples in particular.  
[www.dalits.org/charter.html](http://www.dalits.org/charter.html)

Organizationally, the NCDHR is a loose network structure with a National Secretariat in New Delhi. Its aims, objectives and changing circumstances within Indian and internationally require that it operate on a variety of levels and within a variety of networks. For example, given that caste discrimination is worst at grassroots levels (Interview, November 8, 2004) it is imperative that the campaign have a presence there, particularly at the panchayati raj (village councils) whose powers were expanded in the

73<sup>rd</sup> amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1992. The amendment also reserved one-third of panchayati seats for women in addition to quotas for Dalits and Adivasis. Dalit women and men (as well as Adivasis) are frequently intimidated from participating in panchayats but panchayats are emerging as important sites of Dalit resistance nonetheless. (Interview November 8, 2004)

To all this the NCDHR has added an extensive system of monitoring local atrocities. To date, nearly 500 youth in 15 states have been trained by the NCDHR to monitor human rights abuses to international human rights standards. Any atrocities occurring in the name of caste are investigated and reported with the media alerted and complaints made. In addition to monitoring the NCDHR also works with local NGOs in a variety of advocacy interventions, demonstrations, rallies, mobilizations in an interconnected manner described as “Push from above and pull from below.” (Interview, November 8, 2004)

Elsewhere, economic globalization has accelerated the decentralization of power to the state level in India (Sáez) meaning that increasingly the NCDHR must engage with elected state representatives, ministers, policy-makers, bureaucrats and law enforcement agencies. In addition, the NCDHR must engage the central government and its related agencies. Given that Dalits perceive these levels of government to be controlled by the dominant castes their expectations of a sympathetic ear and compliance are not high, a point made in a report on its website:

**For more than 50 years since Independence**, Dalits have utilized the laws and mechanisms existing within the country to try to promote and protect their rights, only to find that dominant caste values, prejudice and vested interests prevalent across all levels of government and society so seriously debilitate the political will to implement and enforce these laws that they have been emasculated and reduced to the status of mere paper tigers. ([www.dalits.org/CasteRaceandWCAR.html](http://www.dalits.org/CasteRaceandWCAR.html))

The consequence the same report says is that “Dalits have the right to look for solutions at the international level when they have exhausted the national mechanisms to little or no positive effect.”

As a part of its process of seeking international solutions when domestic opportunity structures are blocked the NCDHR has associated itself with a wide range of international networks. In 2000, for example, the NCDHR played a formative role in establishing the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) based in Copenhagen, Denmark. The IDSN exists to:

- promote the global recognition of Dalit human rights
- act as an advocate with governments and international bodies and institutions
- monitor enforcement of anti-caste discrimination
- facilitate interventions at international and multilateral bodies including the European Union, the European Parliament, the UN, the International Labour Organization, the World Trade Organization, World Bank, and Asian Development Bank. ([www.idsn.org/statutes.html](http://www.idsn.org/statutes.html))

The IDSN is composed of three distinct types of networks: 1) international human rights organizations; 2) national Dalit Solidarity Networks; and 3) national advocacy groups.

([www.idsn.org/info.html](http://www.idsn.org/info.html)) International associates of IDSN include an extensive number of organizations including Human Rights Watch, the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, and the Asian Human Rights Commission. National Dalit Solidarity Networks have been established in the U.K., France, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, and the United States by development and human rights NGOs and individuals. These networks conduct local campaigns, alert media, and lobby

governments to promote action to eliminate caste discrimination. The national solidarity networks work closely with Dalit organizations in South Asia. Finally, there are four national advocacy platforms in the caste affected countries of India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Japan. The first three are specifically Dalit platforms but a similar caste phenomenon exists in Japan where the Buraku Liberation League campaigns for the eradication of Buraku discrimination. ([www.imdar.org](http://www.imdar.org)) Beyond this the NCDHR is linked to other networks and NGOs including the Ambedkar Centre for Peace and Justice discussed previously.

Most of these organizations have extensive websites which provide a national and international presence to the Dalit cause. Many provide extensive well-documented reports, news bulletins, articles, lists of books, activities, rallies, and conferences. The website of the NCDHR, itself, is used to promote a positive image of itself internationally. Its material is extensive, well-researched and well-documented. In promoting its activities the NCDHR is careful to avoid criticizing Gandhi on its website despite contrary sentiments internally. This is, no doubt, implicit recognition that Gandhi is a global icon and little good would come from it.

Since 1998, but particularly after 2000, the NCDHR, assisted by its complex of networks, has moved vigorously onto the international and global stage. As it has done so it has been vigorously contested by the Indian government. For its part the NCDHR has attempted to portray itself and its cause in the broadest manner possible in order to legitimize itself both nationally and internationally. On the other hand, the Indian government until very recently has attempted to define the issue of casteism as narrowly as possible, as solely an internal matter. A clear attempt to contain the caste issue as an

“India” only problem. Similarly, the government has refused to acknowledge the existence of no more than 170 million Dalits that are recognized as the categories of ‘scheduled castes’ by the Indian constitution. To the official base of 170 million ‘scheduled castes’ the NCDHR has added 20 million Dalit Christians, 50 million Dalit Muslims, and 20 million Dalits residing ‘abroad’ for a total of 260 million Dalits worldwide. (Hardtmann, 202) Above and beyond these numbers the NCDHR has created links and promoted the issue of caste-based discrimination and violence in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan as well as in countries with similar forms of discrimination, the Buraku in Japan, the Roma (gypsies) and certain communities in Senegal and Mauritania. The point is obvious. Caste is an international issue.

### **The WCAR and Beyond**

At the international and global level the most significant opportunity to highlight the issue of caste discrimination came with the UN sponsored WCAR in Durban, South Africa, in September 2001. This was both an international and global event, international in so far as it was an intergovernmental conference, global in the breadth of its issues and the thousands of people from civil society organizations that attended, both before, at an NGO forum, and during the WCAR itself. Upon hearing that the WCAR would take place Dalits realized that this was a golden opportunity to publicize the issue of caste-based discrimination, both internationally and nationally.

Getting to Durban was no easy matter. Prior to Durban the NCDHR and other Dalit and pro-Dalit organizations had to make a series of interventions to UN human rights bodies and at international meetings held to prepare for the WCAR. The purpose of

the interventions was to place the inclusion of caste discrimination on the main agenda of the WCAR. (Divakar and Ajai, M.)

In the meetings from January 2000 to May 2001 the NCDHR appeared to be enjoying a fair degree of success in placing caste discrimination on the WCAR agenda. The first meeting in which the NCDHR took part was the Bellagio Consultation to the WCAR organized by the International Human Rights Law Group and held in Italy in January 2000. This was a meeting of discriminated communities, human rights NGOs, and various UN human rights bodies. At Bellagio a resolution was passed recommending that caste discrimination against Dalits be put on the agenda of the WCAR and future Prep (Preparatory) Com (Committee) meetings. ([www.dalits.org/UNInterventions.html](http://www.dalits.org/UNInterventions.html))

Subsequently in May 2000 at the First WCAR PrepCom Meeting held in Switzerland the NCDHR delegation received support from Human Rights Watch and other NGOs to ensure that caste discrimination was put on the WCAR agenda. The Indian government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee adamantly opposed the submissions but since this was more of a general organizing meeting nothing was concluded in this regard.

In between the first and second PrepCom meeting the NCDHR activists lead by Prakash Ambedkar, the grandson of Dr. Ambedkar, and supported by several human rights NGOs, attended a meeting of the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Geneva held in August 2000. There they managed to convince the Sub-Commission to pass two resolutions, the first authorized a working paper on “discrimination based on occupation and descent” to be prepared by Mr. Rajendra Kalidasa Goonesekere, Expert Member of the Sub-Commission from Sri Lanka.

The second resolution recommended that descent-based discrimination should be placed on the agenda of the WCAR. To Dalit activists ‘discrimination based on work and descent’ provided sufficient scope to highlight the issue of ‘untouchability’.

([www.dalits.org/UNInterventions.org](http://www.dalits.org/UNInterventions.org))

The resolutions were passed despite the strong objections of the Indian government. In Geneva the Indian government made the same case as it had at the first Prepcom meeting in May, that race was not caste and therefore beyond the scope of CERD. This, however, was a shop worn argument, one that had been made before CERD in 1996 and that had been rejected. CERD had stated that ‘descent’ does not refer only to race and could apply to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes.

To the Indian government’s claims a document posted on the NCDHR website responded claiming:

The reality is that caste is a basis for discrimination on par with racism and apartheid and severely reducing the quality of life for at least 160 million of India’s own citizens. To attempt to smoke screen this reality behind semantic gymnastics on the definitions of race and descent obviously never intended by CERD is nothing but sophistry. [www.dalits.org/CasteRaceandWCAR.htm](http://www.dalits.org/CasteRaceandWCAR.htm)

Furthermore, they argued, it was fallacious for the Indian government to claim that caste was solely an internal issue, the boundaries between the external and internal had disappeared on the issue:

The United Nations World Conference Against Racism is an internal mechanism with respect to India, because India freely chose to ratify CERD in 1969. Therefore, to raise the problem of caste discrimination for attention and action by CERD and the WCAR is not to seek an external solution. ([www.dalits.org/CasteandWCAR.htm](http://www.dalits.org/CasteandWCAR.htm))

Subsequent related area meetings in Bangkok (September 2000) and Tehran (February 2001) were supportive of the Dalits. However, between the Second WCAR

PrepCom meeting in Geneva in May 2001 and the Third WCAR PrepCom meeting in July-August 2001 disaster struck. The Second PrepCom draft of the WCAR agenda included a paragraph by Switzerland prohibiting discrimination on the basis of work and descent. Mysteriously, the inclusion disappeared in documents in the next few days. So did other paragraphs on Palestine. No explanation has been given although many assume that they were a victim of power politics of the Indian and United States governments. Despite frantic efforts by the NCDHR it was unable to have the paragraph reinstated on the official WCAR agenda.

Despite the setback NCDHR decided to send a large contingent of 200 representatives to Durban. They were buoyed by the release of the Goonesekere Report by the UN Sub-Commission on August 9, 2001. The Report reconfirmed CERD's decision that interpreted 'descent' to mean "not solely race but tribal or caste distinctions as well." (As quoted in Hardtmann, 218) India was also cited as the main example of a country where discrimination based on work and descent exists. What the Dalits were losing in terms of the official intergovernmental agenda they were now starting to gain back in terms of publicity. In addition, just prior to Durban the National Human Rights Commission of India, an independent state body, acknowledged that the Dalit situation was intolerable and gave its support to the Dalits. (Thekaekara, 2001:314) The NGO Forum held prior to and overlapping with the intergovernmental conference in Durban also lent its support to the Dalit cause. The media savvy Dalit delegation attracted mass media attention from India and internationally. According to Thekaekara:

This conference grabbed the headlines of every Indian newspaper and TV station and brought caste back into the news with a vengeance. Dalits have seized the opportunity, and used the Durban WCAR to rally people around the issue which for too long has been ignored. (2001:315)

At the conference, itself, the Dalits received the support of UN Human Rights Commissioner, Mary Robinson, UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, and South African President, Thabo Mbeki.

The balance sheet for the Dalits at the WCAR is thus mixed. Clearly, the Dalits did not get everything they wanted. However, this was not to be the end of the international debate on caste discrimination as the issue was subsequently taken up again at UN institutions by the NCDHR, the IDSN and several supporting NGOs. Once again, the Dalits found the UN to be a supportive environment. In August 2002 CERD openly condemned caste discrimination. ([dalits.org/CERD.htm](http://dalits.org/CERD.htm)) In Geneva, on April 19, 2005 the UN Commission on Human Rights adopted by consensus a decision to appoint two Special Rapporteurs to prepare a three year study and analysis of the problem of caste-discrimination and find solutions for its eradication. (W. Chandrakanth, *The Hindu*, April 21, 2005) India, while the prime example of caste discrimination, was not the only country cited, so were twenty other countries in South Asia, Asia (Japan), and Africa. (Thekaekara, *The Hindu*, May 2, 2005). Each year the Special Rapporteurs will present their findings to the UN. The decision means that the UN considers caste discrimination to be on a par with other forms of human rights discrimination. A leader of the NCDHR welcomed the decision this way

This is a belated victory in the internationalization of the plight of the Dalits. We also welcome the stance of the new Indian Government, which did not come in the way of passing this resolution. (Paul Divakar in Chandrakanth, *The Hindu*, April 21, 2005)

## **Conclusion**

As the quotation indicates there can now be little doubt that the Dalits have succeeded in internationalizing the issue of caste discrimination. What this means in

India and other countries where the practice exists is not clear. The UN has few powers to impose its human rights decisions on other countries by any coercive means. Moreover, caste discrimination is still well entrenched and has existed for thousands of years in India although it is eroding.

That said, there can be little doubt that the Dalits have enjoyed a measure of success by:

- Creating strong viable organizations such as the NCDHR
- Creating a global network of supporters
- For the first time getting an Indian government not to stand in their way at the UN
- Publicizing their issues and creating alternative public space in India and abroad.

Where they have not succeeded, as indicated, is in eradicating the caste system.

However, the India government has lost control of public debate and the public agenda and thus the ability to contain the issue as an India only problem. The Dalits have been able to name and shame the practice of caste discrimination internally and externally as the *The Telegraph* of Calcutta freely admits:

It is a sorry state of things when one of the greatest shames of the Indian social arrangement has to be dragged into international daylight because the stubborn Indian mind has not changed in attitude in spite of pious announcements against casteism. (April 26, 2005)

As India becomes a significant player on the global stage it will lead to greater external scrutiny of Indian society by media which may lead to greater scrutiny of its human rights record.<sup>2</sup> Its global competitors may also express concerns that the caste system by depressing overall wages gives India an economic advantage. Whether or not this occurs a robust global Dalit network exists which will continue to put the global spotlight on the flaws in India's human rights record.

Yet, in criticizing the human rights record of the Indian government the Dalits are not rejecting the state Ambedkar helped found. There is a recognition that the state is Janus-faced, that while it has failed in a number of respects that there have been some gains in employment, health, and education that need to be augmented and preserved. A small Dalit middle class has emerged in part with the assistance of the state. Moreover, the Indian state is not monolithic and can be contested. Parts of it such as the National Human Rights Commission have indicated an ability to speak for the Dalits. What the Dalits want is a state shorn of casteism and corruption, an equitable and fair state with capacity, one responsive to their needs. As Corbridge and Harris state, “the history of independent India continues to be written around the state and the state idea.” (238) In sum, we are back where we started. The state, territory and place still matter. But so do the international and the global and the dynamic networked interaction between the local and the global. Politics in India, like elsewhere, it seems, will continue to be played out between contending forces of the vertical and horizontal at levels of society and governance.

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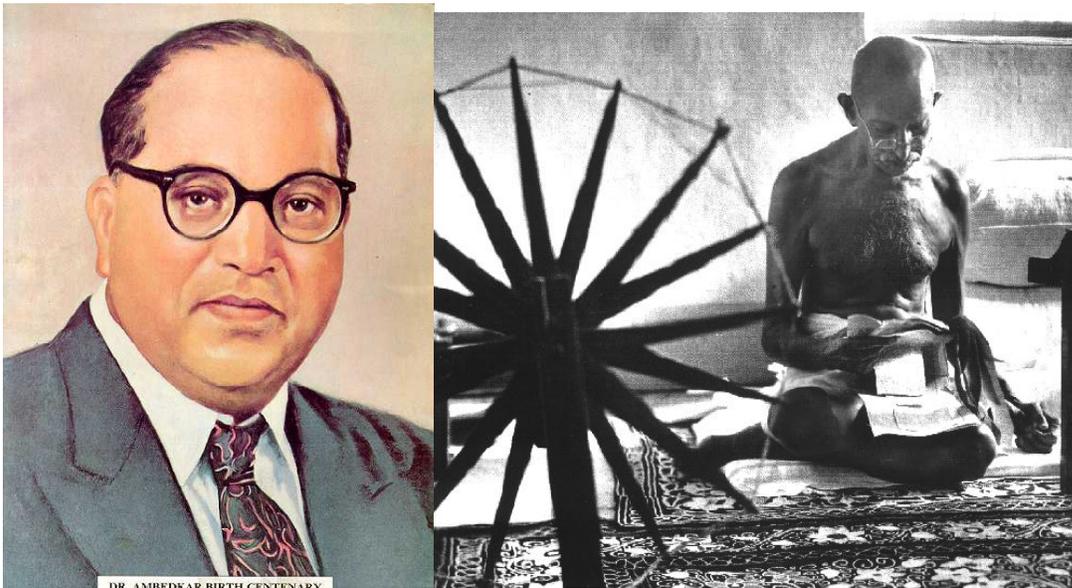
**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>Rosenau defines distant proximities as the processes by which “the forces pressing for greater globalization and thus inducing greater localization interactively play themselves out.” (4) Fracturation

refers to “the pervasive interaction between fragmenting and integrating dynamics unfolding at every level of community.” (11)

2 For example, in May 2005 the *National Post* newspaper had a weeklong front-page series on India. This is a conservative, business friendly newspaper and would not have likely had the series unless it considered India to be a rising economic power that Canadians should know more about. In addition, the Canadian Broadcasting System had two one-hour series on the “Untouchables” on its *Ideas Series* on February 21 and 28, 2005.

## Appendix A- Ambedkar and Gandhi – A Study in Contrasts



<http://www.ambedkar.org>

<http://cafdes2004.free.fr/photos.htm>

## Appendix B – The Demands of NCDHR

Source: International Dalit Solidarity Network (<http://www.idsn.org/NCDHR.doc>)

### *Civil Society*

- Recognize that Dalit Rights are Human Rights.
- Recognize caste-related discrimination and violence as one of the most dehumanizing and criminal acts.
- Recognize caste as the primary factor that marginalizes over 240 million people.
- Execute a collective will and effort to eradicate caste and untouchability practices.
- Eliminate the various cultural and religious practices and sentiments that perpetuate caste discrimination and untouchability.
- Support and partner this Campaign and movements.
- Recognize the unique and valuable contribution of Dalit culture to Indian society.

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*Indian Government*

- Recognize that Dalit Rights are Human Rights.
- Place a White Paper in Parliament on the atrocities against Dalits and the reservation facilities actually granted to Dalits since 1947.
- Effectively implement in spirit and action the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 and Rules, 1995 in all states.
- Work towards total literacy and ensure free, universal and compulsory education for all Dalit children.
- Ensure the right of reservation of Dalits and other 'most backward castes' in all private enterprises.
- Afford full protection to all Dalits participating in Panchayat Raj and other democratic institutions of the country's polity.
- Protect the land rights of Dalits and strictly implement and enforce the Land Reforms Act, including distributing Government, bhoodan, temple and ceiling surplus and any other lands to the Dalits on a swift and time-bound basis.
- Provide the Dalit community in India with sufficient financial resources necessary for their social development, since the denial of basic needs of Dalits amounts to denial of their Human Rights.

*International Community*

- Recognize that Dalit Rights are Human Rights.
- Undertake a global effort to abolish untouchability and caste and to recognize untouchability and caste-related violence as a Crime Against Humanity (CAH), punishable in the severest form possible.
- Ensure that Dalit Human Rights are explicitly and constitutionally guaranteed in the Asian countries where Dalits are domiciled.
- Support our demands in the UN and its various organizations. United Nations
- Recognize that Dalit Rights are Human Rights.
- Appoint a Special Rapporteur or Working Group on the practice of caste discriminations in South Asia.
- Pressurize the Indian Government to respect its international commitments as a party to UN Conventions or Declaration such as UNCHR, CERD and other international standards, by bringing within the purview of Human Rights any form of discrimination and violations against Dalits, by both the State and civil society
- Identify caste discrimination in Article 1 of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination.

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