My Encounter with Caste
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YOUTH

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An American-born brahmin girl, 17, meets her "untouchable " pen pal

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My head bobbed on my mother's shoulder as our car rattled down the street. The pavement steadily worsened the farther away we drove from Bilaspur, in Chattisgurh State in middle India. Our only competing traffic were herds of cows. Two previous days of riding in a train and very few hours of sleep had worn me out. We were heading to a small village called Mathiya to visit a family who belonged to the group of people once called the "untouchable " caste. Since being born into a brahmin family has little significance in America, I was brought up blind to the idea that caste had any modern relevance. Although this helped broaden my perspectives in some ways (I never assumed that I could have greater privileges because of my caste), it also made the idea of caste discrimination incomprehensible to me. My mother sought to dispel my naivetÃ© by taking me to the heart of a country that sometimes still follows regressive discriminatory practices based on caste. What began as a written correspondence between me and a girl of the "untouchable " caste escalated until a damp July morning when I found myself at the train platform in Bilaspur, waiting for a car to arrive.

Although the sun had brightened considerably since four in the morning when we departed the station, the skies were still partially overcast with monsoon clouds. I felt like I had lost my bearings when our car eventually stopped in front of a house. Bhagwati Uncle led the procession by entering through the doorway where several people were standing just beyond. The only light came from the open courtyard. I sat apprehensively on the bed, blinking at these unfamiliar faces who were smiling kindly at me. They were shortly introduced as my friend's grandfather, her father and their neighbor. A homely woman rushed out from a room and hugged me tightly as if I was her favorite niece. "Kishori will be here in a minute, " she said in

Hindi, translated by my mother, and went back into the room. I fidgeted with my glasses and managed a self-conscious smile.

Kishori, age 19, and I had been pen pals for almost two years, but had never met. We were introduced by Dr. Ramdas Lamb, professor of religion at the University of Hawaii. He's an advisor to my mother's Hindu reform organization, Navya Shastra, and has been associated with Kishori's village for many years. She would write letters in Hindi, which my mother would translate for me; I would write back in English, and someone would translate for her. We wrote about our personal lives and day-to-day happenings, exchanging our thoughts on cultural novelties. Her letters were always very sweet. Within a few months we became close friends, and I began to call her "my sister." Although she continually invited me to visit her in Chattisgarh, time had not permitted me to accept her invitation until now.

"Kishori! Kishori!" her mother called several times. A few minutes passed, then a young woman briskly walked out with her head bowed shyly and came to sit on the cot beside me. There was an awkward silence, followed by a melee medley of Hindi and English, and then silence again. "Kishori, I am so happy to see you, " I started in English. She smiled and nodded. I said, "How are you? How do you like school?" I asked many questions, not knowing where to begin. Kishori explained--in Hindi, again translated into English by my mother--that she was in the second year of college, but she had spent most of the first year of college at home. "I learned better studying at home. The teachers hardly taught us anything, " she said. I learned that her favorite subject was geography, that she was an English major who had read the works of Keats and Tennyson and studied in a government college predominantly for the Scheduled Castes.

Scheduled Caste (pronounced as "sheduled ") was a term resulting from the British government in The Government Act of 1935. It formally abolished untouchability and reclassified the lower-castes in lists, or schedules, hence Scheduled Castes. Gandhiji introduced the word Harijans (children of God) to describe them, believing that the connotation of the word was more uplifting than merely "Scheduled Caste; " but this term did not receive the welcome he had expected. "Gandhiji separated us when he called us Harijans, " explained neighbor Mohan Ram. Kishori's father and her grandfather nodded in agreement.

Another grouping, ranked slightly higher by the British, was called "Other Backward Castes, " or OBCs. Although both were derided equally by the still higher castes, the

OBCs were determined to maintain their traditional social superiority over the SCs, based solely on their higher ranking in the 1935 act, Dadaji explained. He mused, "OBCs eat meat and drink alcohol, while we are pure vegetarians, but are still considered lower."

Dadaji is a friendly, bespectacled grandfather who speaks patiently, as if he has come to terms with his life. "In my time, " he began, "there was much discrimination. I stayed in a hostel in college. We SCs were forced to sleep and eat separately from all the other castes. Even when we were working, we would sit separately from them because we had grown to be scared of them. The officers would look at me as if I were beneath them. Even today, all the houses in each area of the village are for people belonging to the same caste." He pointed to the fork in the road that separated the houses of the SCs from the houses of the OBCs.

Kishori's father, Professor Gajanan Bhatpare, explained that Kishori wasn't always spared the whiplash of discrimination. "She usually receives very good grades. But her schoolmates sometimes become jealous that she is from a lower caste, yet she gets higher scores than they do. The upper caste students taunt her behind her back, but they keep their jealousy inside more, because we are a respectable, educated family. The upper castes pick more on other families." Kishori's father is a professor of political science at her college; his brother, Bhagwati Uncle, is a geography teacher at a high school.

Professor Lamb arrived midway through the conversation, having come from Hawaii to Bilaspur to teach as a visiting professor. In this way he has been helping this village for the last thirty years. "Gajanan, " he started, "is the ideal teacher. Everyone looks up to him and his family, and all the students come to his house. The families trust Bhatpare Sir." "Yet, " he continued, "the families won't eat with them or perform religious ceremonies with them. I've even seen them put up a string which they cannot cross. They know better, and on an individual level, they won't feel discrimination, but at a social level, they will." Kishori spoke up to reinforce this point: "As friends, the upper castes treat me fine. When we are together in a religious space, we see their true colors."

Bhagwati Uncle's two sons entered the room, bowing to their relatives and my father with a polite smile and touching the feet of my mother, Kishori and me. I looked inquisitively about for someone to explain what was going on. "We touch the feet of the niece and nephew as respect for Kauslya and Ram, " Monu helpfully

clarified with a smile. "All castes except brahmins do this, but especially us since we are Satnamis." Satnami is a sect of Hinduism, found mostly in the scheduled caste areas of Chattisgarh, which was founded by the Ram bhaktar, Guru Ghasidas (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guru_Ghasidas). "Ramya didi (sister), deep down I wonder why I should be considered lower than others. It's not something I'm happy with, " he said with a pained expression. "But I'm happy to be a Satnami."

Sonu agreed with his brother's sentiments. "Indirectly, discrimination happens. The minute they find out that we might be reservation students, their attitude changes completely. When someone asks me if I am an untouchable, I feel very sad. Papa feels sad, too."

"We try to do things for our people, but it's not enough, " Bhagwati Uncle told us sadly. "It really hurts. Sometimes, we just want to run away from here." Professor Ramdas Lamb commented with a worn expression, "This isn't going to change for another few generations."

These words, their story, was my introduction to a turbulent world that had never converged with mine before. I was dumbfounded. Caste discrimination is an idea that seems simplistically backwards, but the people of Mathiya, a microcosm of the larger SC communities, gave it reality and immediacy through the telling of their painful stories. Although I realized that I could never completely understand the trauma of their experiences and the bleak despair of the future, this encounter took me one step forward.

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