

In India's Schools, Discrimination Drives Dropouts

By Aditi Malhotra and Nikita Lalwani

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Dilip Banwasi, 8, stood outside the mud hut where he lives for a photograph with his books in Rampur, a northern Indian village in Uttar Pradesh. --- Junho Kim/The Wall Street Journal

RAMPUR, India — At the government school in this north Indian village, 8-year-old Dilip Banwasi is being taught his place.

His third-grade teacher makes him sweep the classroom floor and sit in the back row. When it is time for lunch, Dilip—a member of a low social class referred to as “rat catchers”—is among the last few to be served. At recess, his classmates warn, “Don’t play with us,” Dilip says.

Dilip’s experience reflects a significant obstacle to improving social mobility in India: discrimination in schools. Roughly half of all Indian public-school students drop out before eighth grade, and most of the dropouts are from lower caste, Muslim or tribal communities, according to a [new report from Human Rights Watch](#).

The report, which looked at four Indian states, places the blame, in part, on discrimination in the public education system. Teachers often address poorer students using derogatory terms, the report says, and order them to perform unpleasant chores, like cleaning toilets.

“Teachers are products of a society that discriminates against marginalized communities, and they bring these attitudes into the classroom,” says Jayshree Bajoria, the report’s author.



Students sat in a classroom in a government-run primary school for boys in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh. --- Junho Kim/The Wall Street Journal

The report examines access to education in India four years after the country implemented a large-scale education overhaul, the Right to Education Act, guaranteeing free schooling to children ages six to 14. Though nearly all students are now enrolled in school, activists say widespread prejudice, and lack of teacher accountability, has made it difficult to keep them there.

A education official at the Ministry of Human Resource Development declined to comment on the HRW report.

Discrimination against tribal, Muslim and lower-caste communities in India is commonplace, but it can be particularly damaging in schools, activists say, because of the importance of education to finding better jobs and breaking away from traditional social and economic restraints.

Students who drop out often end up working in the field, joining the roughly 13 million Indian children, most of whom are minorities, engaged in child labor.

In Dilip’s neighborhood, his is the first generation to be attending school. The adults work in brick kilns or are employed as servants in the homes of the upper-caste villagers.



Dilip sat with his school books open in his village. --- Junho Kim/The Wall Street Journal

Despite his enthusiasm for his studies—he wears his school uniform, khaki shirt and trousers, even on weekends—Dilip’s attendance is thinning. In March, he skipped a week of school. So far this month he has attended only half of his classes because, he says, he doesn’t enjoy being mocked.

Dilip’s teacher praises his intelligence, up to a point. “He’s bright, but bright only amongst the Musahars,” says Dilip’s teacher, Ramakant Sharma, referring to his community of Dalits, a social class previously referred to as “untouchables.”

Mr. Sharma said, “Discrimination doesn’t happen anymore, at least not in this school.” He added that “it is our duty, as teachers, to educate irrespective of caste and religion.”

Near Dilip’s school, at the main public school for girls, several students say they rarely interact with children of lower castes. One girl, Paishwani Singh, says she knew that one of her classmates was Dalit, but doesn’t believe that the girl has any friends. “I have never seen her in class,” she says.



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The Right to Education Act included a three-year deadline for states to meet its targets, among them ensuring schools have enough teachers and adequate infrastructure, like toilets and access to drinking water. Most states failed to meet that goal.

Ms. Bajoria of HRW says the law should include provisions for teacher training and monitoring, and that there should be clearly defined penalties for teachers who treat students unequally. Educating teachers about what constitutes discrimination is important because sometimes the prejudice is unintentional, she says.

The law should also specify when a student qualifies as a “dropout,” activists say, a definition that can vary by state. In Dilip’s school, for instance, teachers say there is no mechanism in place to determine a dropout case.

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