

64,000 vacancies in government meant for SCs have not been filled up in Gujarat

Dalit human rights activist Martin Macwan, who founded the Gujarat-based organisation Navsarjan Trust, in an interaction with The Hindu highlighted the rampant discrimination against the Scheduled Caste community in the State and the impunity for atrocities on them that has led to the current wave of angry protests. The public flogging of four Dalit men by vigilantes in Una, Gujarat, for skinning a dead cow has sparked nation-wide outrage. But this is not the first time an incident of this nature is happening in the State, Mr. Macwan said.

“Way back in 1986, one of my own colleagues had been shot dead while organising the Dalit labourer community to fight for their land rights and resist labour exploitation in Golana village. So the history of abuse and discrimination against Dalits goes a long way back,” he said. Compelled by such incidents, Macwan set up the Navsarjan Trust in 1988 to fight for the rights of Dalits. He was awarded the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award by a U.S.-based non-profit organisation in 2000 for his work.

Impunity for atrocities

He pointed to an earlier incident in Thangadh, Surendranagar, in 2012, in which four Dalit men were killed during a police firing, but no action was taken against the perpetrators. The firing took place after clashes broke out between the Dalit and Bharwad communities during the Tarnetar fair on the question of setting up stalls. “That case remains unresolved till now, and the court has termed it a “C summary” case as the government has cited lack of evidence in the matter,” he said, adding that such incidents have encouraged impunity for atrocities committed against Dalits.

“Gujarat has a mere 2.33 per cent of India’s Dalit population, but when it comes to atrocities, it ranks in the top half of the country,” he said, citing reports by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the National Crime Records Bureau. “In the Thangadh case, we went on appeal in the Gujarat High Court as the post-mortem reports showed that the Dalit men had received bullet wounds. But the lack of action has resulted in people not trusting the government anymore to act decisively”

Conviction rates in cases of murder and assault of Dalits in the State were less than 4 per cent when Navsarjan began its work here, but three

decades later, the organisation has managed to improve conviction rates to 28-29 per cent, Macwan said. In 2010, Navsarjan undertook a major study titled 'Understanding Untouchability' spanning 1569 villages of Gujarat, covering 98, 000 respondents. They recorded 98 forms of discrimination practiced against Dalits, including in the mid-day meal scheme, denial of temple entry, abuse, among others.

“Instead of acting on our recommendations to reverse discrimination, the Gujarat government commissioned a study by CEPT University, Ahmedabad, to counter our findings. Their study only covered five villages and there was no mention of untouchability. Their only recommendation was to extend the mid-day meal scheme to higher secondary levels,” he said.

No upward mobility

Central to the current upheaval in Gujarat is the perpetuation of caste-based occupations such as processing carcasses by Dalit people, even though Constitutional provisions exist to improve their lives via education and employment. “More than 64,000 vacancies in government meant for SCs have not been filled up in Gujarat and this reflects the situation across the country,” Macwan said. “Though atrocity is not everyday, discrimination is everyday,” he said.

The study report on untouchability by Navsarjan had found that in 90 per cent of temples in Gujarat, Dalits were not allowed an entry. In 54 per cent of government schools, Dalit children were made to sit separately.

Due to poor educational and employment opportunities, Dalits have no choice but to resort to caste-based occupations such as manual scavenging and disposing of dead animals and people. “Though the minimum wage law entitles agricultural labourers to Rs. 176 per day, we found that in rural Gujarat, Dalit labourers continue to be paid only Rs. 50-60 per day. Because of discrimination in education there have even been cases of SC children committing suicide,” he said.

During a major programme in Ahmedabad in 2010, Macwan said, he came across cases of 1500 children in Saurashtra who had been forced to clean urinals and toilets in the schools as they were Dalit. “Children from other castes were not given such duty. We documented the village-wise names of these children and submitted the document to the government. In a public hearing chaired by retired chief justice of the Gujarat High

Court, we made recommendations for action too, but the government did nothing,” he said.

Need for land reforms

“After Independence, the land reforms programme was supposed to give land to the tiller. But the poor implementation of the reform has meant that landless Dalits continue to remain marginalised,” he said. “Between 1996 and 2000, Navsarjan identified 6000 acres of land that were given to Dalit people under land reforms on paper but they didn’t have legal possession. They filed a PIL in the Gujarat High Court demanding the government for immediate possession, but nothing happened. Of the 12,500 villages in Gujarat in which Dalits live, in 250 villages alone we found 6000 acres of land that was meant for Dalits but lying undistributed. So you can figure out the extent of the failure of land reforms. It is the single most important factor for Dalit impoverishment in the State today,” he said.

Macwan cited the example of the Patels who have benefitted from land reforms in Gujarat. “Hundred years ago, even the Patels were counted as Shudras or lower caste. But after the Saurashtra Chief Minister U.N. Dhebar carried out successful land reforms for the community, the Patels rose in power and influence and improved their lot. Today if similar steps are taken for the Dalits and tribal communities, they can overcome poverty and vulnerability,” he said.

Describing the Gujarat Chief Secretary’s recent comment calling ‘gau rakshaks’ (cow vigilantes) as hooligans as “encouraging”, Mr. Macwan said that the State government must now act against them in order to restore the confidence of the people.

“Unfortunately, Ambedkar called for an annihilation of caste but what we are seeing right now is the perpetuation of caste,” he said. “Why is it that even after 68 years of Independence, there are still people who make a living skinning the carcasses of animals and cleaning human waste?”