

Social Watch - Tamil Nadu



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Caste: Then, Now, Forever?

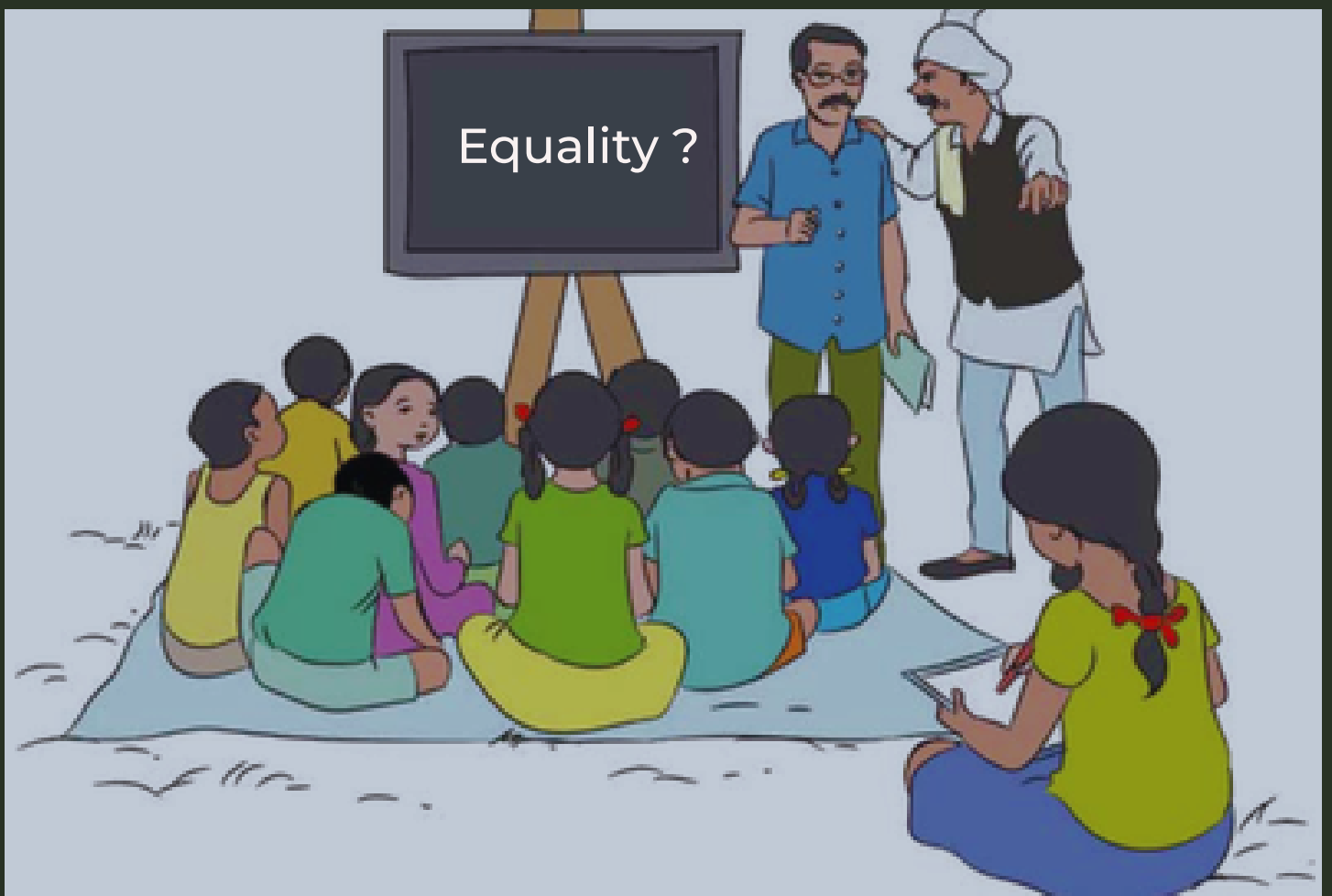
(A Social Work Student's Perspective)



Table of Contents



Director's Note	03	Social Work and the Silence on Caste	09
The Myth of a Casteless Society	04	Equality vs Equity	10
Growing Up with Caste	05	Caste in Everyday Life	11
Invisible Caste, Visible Inequality	06	Standing Against Caste	12
Dalit Students and Campus Reality	07	The Wall – A poem about caste	13
Dalit Women: Double Discrimination	08	Activities	14-19
		Author's Note	20



Director's Note

India is a deeply caste-ridden society. Caste, though often unspoken, continues to shape lives in deeply unequal ways across India as a whole and Tamil Nadu in particular. It spreads its venomous wings in all spheres of human life. For example, in education, it appears through subtle exclusion—students from marginalised communities may face discrimination from peers, lowered expectations from teachers, or a lack of access to quality institutions. This affects confidence, performance, and long-term aspirations.

In job opportunities, caste operates through informal networks and biases that hinder the growth and development of the less privileged communities. Hiring decisions, promotions, and workplace inclusion can be influenced by one's social background, often privileging dominant groups while sidelining others. Merit is frequently judged through a caste lens, reinforcing inequality.

Caste also intersects sharply with gender reality. Women from oppressed castes face double discrimination—both as women and as members of marginalised communities. They are more vulnerable to physical and mental violence, sexual exploitation, and limited access to education and employment and other vital resources.

Culturally, caste dictates practices, traditions, and social interactions. In the name of caste-pride, honour killing takes place when young boys and girls decide to marry, abolishing caste identities. Politically, caste becomes a tool for mobilization, where identities are used to gain votes rather than dismantle inequality.

As Dr. Ambedkar desired long ago, we should work towards the annihilation of caste in India. Eradicating caste requires both structural, personal, and attitudinal change. Strengthening inclusive education, enforcing anti-discrimination laws, and ensuring equal opportunities in employment are essential. Equally important is changing mindsets—encouraging inter-caste interactions, questioning inherited prejudices, and promoting values of equality and dignity. Only through collective awareness and action can society move towards true social justice. Personal sharing found in the article will throw good reflections on the gory face of caste, which are very relevant to the context.



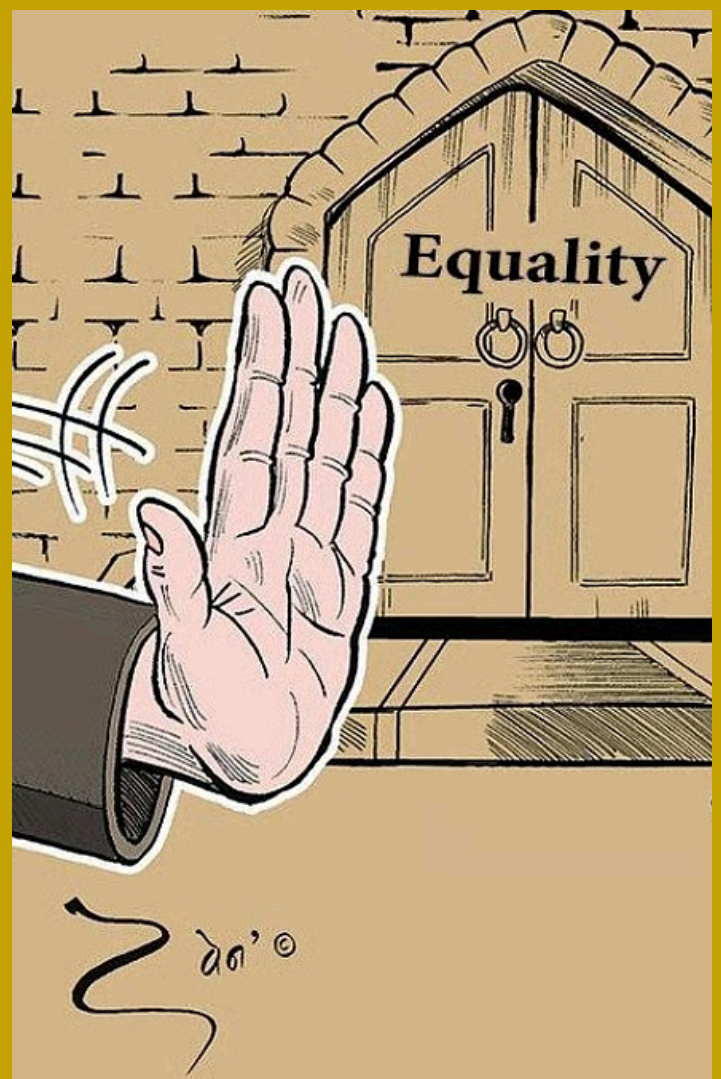
Fr. A. Irudayaraj SJ
Director - Social watch Tamil Nadu

The Myth of a Casteless Society

Caste is a topic that has been beaten to death.” “Who takes caste seriously in this day and age?” “It is because you hold on to your caste identity that you have not achieved empowerment.”

Does Caste Still Matter?

These are statements often heard whenever caste is discussed. Yet, they raise a fundamental question—if caste truly no longer matters, why do its consequences continue to shape lives? The answer is simple: if people treated others with dignity and equality, caste would not remain a problem.



Growing Up with Caste



Caste is something that was introduced to me at a young age by a cautious father. As a curious child, I often wondered about various incidents reported in the news. It never made sense to me why people did horrible things to their fellow citizens when no major crime was committed. It was difficult for me to accept the fact that we were considered impure and untouchable just because we were born into a particular community.

“Am I considered scum? Is it true that I am always limited in opportunities? Am I an anomaly among the masses?” I often wondered. My family tried their best to shield us, young kids, from seeing the harsh realities of life growing up. Because of this fact, despite learning the nature of our existence very early, I never quite understood the ramifications of what it truly meant to be a Dalit until my adolescence.

Invisible Caste, Visible Inequality

It only made sense to me how caste takes root with the mindset of 'helping our own' after I started to become aware of the world I grew up in. Everywhere I could notice subtle things that, on the surface, look harmless but actually have malicious intent behind them. These ranged from more opportunities being given to a certain set of people to the denial of social mobility for another. The more I tried to look into caste, the more I realized how efforts to sweep it under the rug as a thing of the past are being attempted desperately. What further perplexed me was the noticeable absence of the major contributions of leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Periyar in lessons on history compared to the prevalence of other prominent leaders. Were they not considered important? Or were the areas of their work considered taboo to be spoken about for the future of this country? Time has proven that pretending that an issue doesn't exist can never truly solve it. The suffocated will keep suffocating and those who are lucky enough to be on the upper echelons will keep watching in silence.



Dalit Students and Campus Reality



As a student, it is all the more frightful to navigate the violent waters of society. Cases of discrimination, harassment, and suicide of Dalit students have increased considerably over the years, with data from UGC revealing that complaints of caste-based

discrimination in universities and colleges have risen by 118.4% over the past five years, from 173 in 2019–20 to 378 in 2023–24. However, what this data doesn't reveal is the unspoken inhibition shown towards Dalit students by others. This fact became clear to me when someone I know remarked in a passing conversation, "Those SC people have weaselled their way in by claiming all kinds of benefits, denying us our opportunities." This statement serves as a testament to the hidden resentment harboured by so many people over the measures brought in by the makers of the Constitution to reduce the inequalities prevalent in society.

Dalit Women and Double Discrimination

Today, caste has not died, but rather evolved and adapted to fit into the structure of modern society. It has taken various forms in different settings and has not loosened its grip on the marginalized sections of society. Dalit women face even more risks, being victims of “double jeopardy” in many cases. Dalit women have historically been abused verbally, physically, and sexually by the oppressors.



One statement made by a victim of sexual abuse has always stuck with me. She said, “They call us unclean and untouchables, but they have no problem in forcing themselves on us when they want to rape us”. Many such stories exist, where the oppressors show no remorse in their actions, but instead take pride in them, considering them as judgments passed to those who dare defy the roles they have been assigned



Social Work and the Silence on Caste

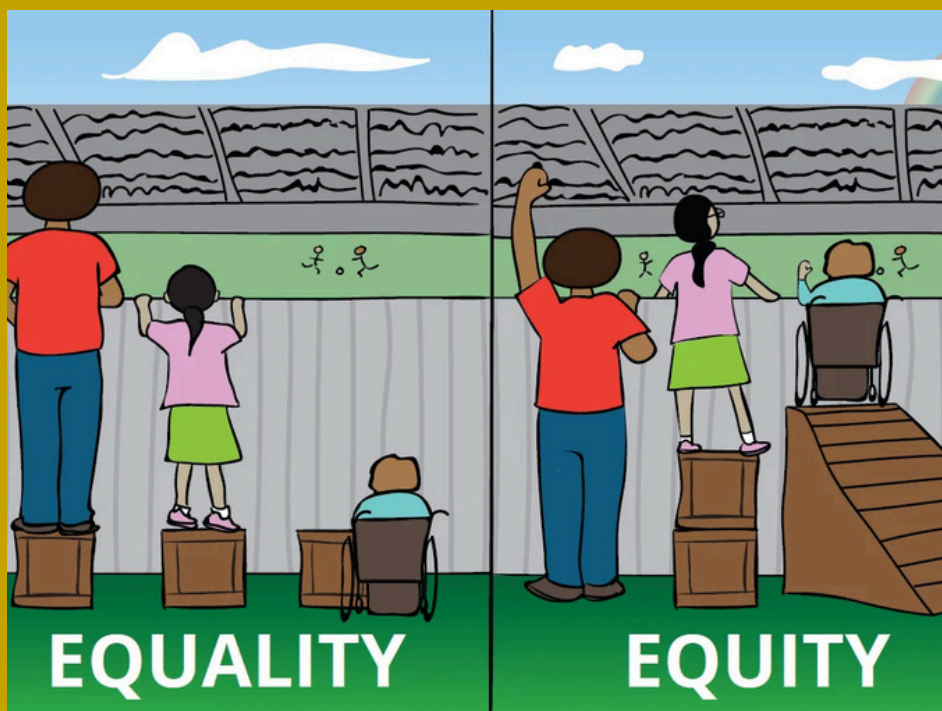
Social work is one of the greatest professions in the world, where people help other people to help themselves. However, when I was introduced to the world of social work as a student, I was disappointed by how few were willing to confront caste directly, often citing its “sensitivity” as a reason for their silence. Students remain largely unaware of the horrifying experiences that marginalized sections of society go through even today. There is a grave need to sensitize this unaware part of society, especially the youth, to the issue of caste, how it came to be a system, and its implications.



Equality vs Equity

There is also a need for an intersectional approach, i.e., recognizing how multiple forms of inequality intersect to create unique experiences of oppression and an anti-oppressive approach in addressing the issue of caste, by

challenging the notion of systemic forms of discrimination, power imbalances, and striving for an egalitarian society. Some people argue that equality means treating everyone the same, and special provisions for some people



cannot create an egalitarian society. What we need to focus on first is the concept of equity. Equity means ensuring fairness by providing resources based on the unique needs of the person to achieve equal outcomes, whereas equality treats everyone the same, regardless of their individual differences. It is important to understand that we cannot ask two people to run the same race, but have different starting points.

Caste is not a relic of the past. It is the lived reality of millions that continues to strive to shape lives and write

destinies of those who are deemed untouchable. A relative of mine shared an incident she witnessed, which really shook me. While she was waiting in line at a temple, a so-called upper-caste woman was directing some visitors to stand separately. She then chided one of her companions, asking, "Why are you standing with them instead of us?" This story perfectly encapsulates the future of caste in my eyes. The question is not whether caste will exist forever, but whether we will.

Caste in Everyday Life



Standing Against Caste



Merely acknowledging the system's existence, as many do, is not enough. It is each individual's responsibility to challenge it, advocate for equality, and work to create a society where everyone can one day sit together and eat from the same plate. People should never be tolerated but must be accepted. The fight against the roots of evil is long and arduous. In silence, we show complicity, but in using our voice, we can show solidarity. It is up to each one of us to ensure that no human being's rights are violated, and that Dalits are broken no more.

The Wall – A poem about caste

“I am so in love with the wall
 It does not break, bend, bow, or
 fall
 It stands up proudly, head held up
 high
 It does not yell or whisper any lies
 It stands defiantly against the test
 of time as
 Only a witness to someone else's
 crimes
 Its markings sing songs, its cracks
 tell tales of
 Fallen, fainted females and
 maimed, mauled males
 Its dull, faded paint is a guardian
 for generations
 A home for peace, and bloodied
 sensations
 It does not show anger, it does not
 show hate
 No matter who leans on it, it does
 not discriminate
 Through pillage and plunder, it
 only stands still
 It's filled with honour, yet does not
 ever kill.”



Activity Jan - Feb 2026



On 06 January 2026, Social Watch – Tamil Nadu and Madras School of Social Work organised a Student Discussion Forum with a documentary on P. S. Krishnan. Students actively discussed governance, integrity, and challenges in public service. The session inspired ethical thinking and reinforced experiential learning.



A two-day PVTG meeting was held on 10–11 Jan 2026 in Chennai by Social Watch – Tamil Nadu to review progress and plan future development of tribal communities. Representatives from various tribes shared achievements, challenges, and suggestions on education, livelihood, land rights, and economic growth.

Activity Jan - Feb 2026



The programme on democracy and marginalized communities was held on 24.01.2026 at Loyola LICET College by Social Watch – Tamil Nadu. Speakers emphasized equality, social responsibility, and inspired students through Ambedkar's vision. The interactive session raised awareness and encouraged critical thinking among 65 students.



Social Watch – Tamil Nadu staff participated in a global symposium on caste discrimination organised by Madras School of Social Work. Thol. Thirumavalavan highlighted global caste issues and the need for collective action. The event promoted awareness, youth engagement, and global solidarity.

Activity Jan - Feb 2026



On 3 Feb 2026, the Jesuit Provincial of Chennai visited Social Watch Tamil Nadu and engaged with the team on its work and mission. The team presented SWTN's history, ongoing initiatives, plans, and administrative overview. The Provincial appreciated their efforts and encouraged continued commitment to social justice and community empowerment.



A book release programme was held on 05.02.2026 at Loyola College to promote inclusive literature for persons with disabilities. Speakers highlighted the importance of accessibility, dignity, and empowering differently-abled voices through writing. The event inspired students and participants to support inclusion and work towards a barrier-free society.

Activity Jan - Feb 2026



A team discussion on 06.02.2026 focused on a socio-economic study of the Puthirai Vannar community at Social Watch Tamil Nadu. Participants highlighted issues like livelihood challenges, social exclusion, cultural identity, and the need for comprehensive documentation. The session concluded with plans to revise the questionnaire and conduct field research for community development.



The two-day meeting (06–07 Feb 2026) brought together Irular leaders at MCC for community empowerment. Discussions focused on unity, education, rights, and forming a state-level association. The programme ended with drafting bye-laws and planning the launch of the federation.

Activity Jan - Feb 2026



An awareness programme on 15 Feb 2026 in Valparai engaged 80 tribal members on forest rights, government processes, and education. Sessions explained the Forest Rights Act, verification procedures, and the importance of collective action and awareness. The programme improved understanding, encouraged the use of scholarships, and empowered communities for social and educational development.



A two-day leadership training (21-22 Feb 2026) at Palavai Tribal Centre engaged 40 student leaders to build leadership and social awareness. Sessions focused on leadership, social media, constitutional values, and youth participation for social change. The program enhanced skills, confidence, and motivated youth to become responsible leaders in their communities.

Activity Jan - Feb 2026



A two-day creative writing workshop (27–28 Feb 2026) at Loyola College, Vettavalam, developed students' writing and creative skills. Sessions covered storytelling, script writing, and practical exercises guided by an expert trainer. The workshop boosted students' confidence, creativity, and ability to express ideas effectively.



The Honouring Programme 2026 on 28 Feb 2026 in Chennai celebrated students' achievements and promoted education as a path to success. Speakers and sessions motivated youth on leadership, discipline, and the importance of higher education. The programme boosted student confidence, encouraged academic growth, and strengthened community engagement.

Author's Note



I am R. Pradeep, a first-year MSW student at the Department of Social Work (Aided), MCC, with a strong foundation in social work and a deep interest in community development. My academic and field experiences have shaped my commitment to working at the grassroots level, focusing on reaching the unreached and voicing for the voiceless.

I view social work as a continuous process of engagement, reflection, and responsibility. I am particularly interested in understanding how social structures influence access, opportunity, and dignity, and how community-based approaches can address these inequalities.

I am also passionate about using art—such as theatre, songs, and writing—as a tool for awareness and social change. Through my creative work, I aim to bring forward unheard voices, connect lived realities with public understanding, and contribute to building a more inclusive and responsive society.

Publication

Part - IV November - December 2025

Youth today are increasingly shaped by cinema, which plays a powerful role in influencing their understanding of leadership and political awareness. Films often portray social issues, inspiring young people to question injustice and engage in democratic processes. When critically engaged, cinema can become a tool for nurturing responsible leadership and active citizenship in contemporary society.

