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Where Dalits are forced to walk barefoot, eat in shells

Aninashi (T.Nadu), June 27 (ANI): In a blatant violation of human rights, lower castes in a village in Tamil Nadu are being forced to walk barefoot, eat in coconut shells and even bow in obsequiousness by the landlords.

In Aninashi village, which has an extremely stringent feudal society, the "Dalits", as the lower castes are called, are mostly employed as labourers, depending solely on the dominant community for survival.

These people have been facing discrimination for ages with each generation inheriting the derogatory customs and rules, intact in their most primitive form.

The Dalits live in separate colonies and are forbidden from entering restaurants, shops and even kiosks.

At tea stalls they are made to sit in special enclosures and served in either coconut shells or disposable plastic cups instead of the usual steel tumblers used for others.

Palaniatthal, a Dalit woman, said they even bury the dead in separate graveyards.

"When we go out for shopping, we are asked to stand separate. We cannot even wear slippers in the village. When we go to tea shops, we are given a separate tea cup and we have to drink the tea standing outside the shop. We are not allowed to enter temples. Our graveyards are also separate," she said.

Hindu scriptures separate people into four broad castes - Brahmin priests, warriors, traders and labourers, while rest fall outside the framework of caste system.

Dalits sit at the bottom of the 3,000-year-old caste system.

"When we go to or even pass through the upper caste colonies, we have to bend ourselves in front of them (the landlords). When we go to the temples, we have to worship God from a distance. Even for using the water taps, first preference is given to the upper castes. And after we have taken water we have to properly clean the tap. Such practices are also prevalent in the barber shops. In tea shops as well separate tumblers are given to our people," Palaniswamy, another Dalit villager, said. While the men are forbidden to even pass through residential quarters the rules are little lax for the Dalit women, who are often employed as maids.

But even they cannot enter the interiors of the house and are employed as sweepers and gardeners for a pittance.

"I am working in a Gounder's (upper caste landlord) farm and the owner has asked us to bring a coconut shell as a coffee cup to drink. Otherwise as well, we are not allowed to enter inside their houses and will give us money, food etc far outside their houses," Muniamma, who works as a maid servant, said.

Even the children have not been spared and have to sit on floors and are never allowed to mingle with the upper caste children. Numbering 160 million, close to the population of Brazil, Dalits represent 16 percent of India's population of more than one billion. Officially, caste discrimination is banned in India. And special quotas exist for Dalits in parliament, state legislatures, village councils, government jobs and educational institutions.

But Amnesty International and other human rights activists say that India's Dalits continue to be discriminated against. (ANI)

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