Untouchables In The World Of IT
By Gail Omvedt

KASEGAON, INDIA (PANOS FEATURES) – "In Pune they just assume that anyone working in computers is a Brahmin," says a young man from a small town near our home in Western India. He, like many Dalits (ex-Untouchables) is trying to break into the new world of Information Technology, but fears to reveal his origins to his colleagues. With caste attitudes continuing to shape marriages, life chances and career opportunities, the fear is understandable.

Though the current government in India is projecting a feel-good factor about India – its catchy phrase is "India shining" – there are significant social groups for whom a good deal of rot lies under the shine. Since caste still operates as a defining condition in establishing marriages, social relations, and access to employment, millions of ex-Untouchables and other former low castes remain behind in education, employment and access to wealth.

Although Untouchability and casteism is banned in India there is wide practice of discrimination, and statistics show there is a broad correlation between economic situation and position within the caste hierarchy.

The government may boast of economic progress and grand new development schemes such as a 'golden quadrilateral' of highways joining major cities or plans to interlink major rivers, but it has failed to address issues such as education, caste and gender discrimination and the rural-urban gap.

The result is continued upper-caste dominance in the professions, business, culture and the world of Information Technology.

Dalits are fighting back. In the villages, increasing efforts to claim simple human rights – to walk the same roads and drink from the same teacups that upper caste Hindus use – have often led to violent rioting. Efforts of young people to break away from caste-defined marriage relations have resulted in brutal murders. Dalits have formed political parties, fighting elections with notable success in some cases but also coming up against refusals to allow them to vote. They have fought for land, tried small income-generating projects, joined – and where possible set up – their own NGOs. And finally, the new, small and still insecure Dalit middle class that the system of 'reservation' – or positive discrimination – in education and public sector employment has helped to foster, is attempting to move beyond its limitations.

Now, in the new era of a dynamic but privatised economy, most Dalits are clear that their future lies beyond the public sector.

Three-and-a-half years ago, Dalits converged in massive numbers at Durban in South Africa to argue before the United Nations' World Conference Against Racism that caste was, indeed, a form of race-related and birth-linked discrimination. The Indian government succeeded at the time in preventing any official recognition of this, but publicity was gained and alliances were made.

Several months later, in January 2002, a large conference of Dalit intellectuals was held in Bhopal, in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. It represented the first governmental response to the new demands being made by Dalits.

One of the major movers of the conference was a young journalist named Chandrabhan Prasad, the only regular Dalit columnist in an English daily paper. Prasad had forecast the themes of the conference with a hard-hitting series of articles contrasting the successes achieved by affirmative action in the United States with the failures in India.

He compared the percentage of African-Americans at Harvard with the miserable number of Dalits in Delhi University (less than 2% of the faculty); and contrasted steps consciously taken by the US Editors Guild with the failure to even admit the problem in India.

Finally, Prasad pointed out that while the US's leading private sector IT firm, Microsoft had recognised the need for affirmative action and was taking steps to increase minority recruitment, engaging with the community, beginning training programmes, this was something still undreamed of in corporate India.

"We must get into every field, computers, the professions, the arts, the media, business; we need to learn English" was the theme activists like Prasad put forward at the Bhopal conference. The answer lay conceptually in the notion of 'Diversity', the idea that the major societal institutions of wealth, power and privilege should include all the significant social groups in that society – in the case of India, groups defined in terms of caste, gender and religion.

The specific demands in this regard ranged from land for every Dalit family to the awarding of government contracts to Dalits according to their proportion in the population, which is about 17.5%.

The broad theme of 'diversity' was endorsed in 2003 by an international Dalit conference held in Vancouver, Canada, financed by the earnings and support of those Dalits who had migrated abroad, using through community religious institutions and using Internet technology – including websites and e-groups – to organise themselves.

Though 'reservation in the private sector' is nominally now supported by many political parties, the private sector itself has been slow to respond. Infosys, one of India's leading – and Brahmin-run – software companies, did sponsor a

seminar on 'Contemporary Dalit Issues' in 2003, but its famous chairman Narayana Murthy only said, "We have our international compulsions," warning Dalits that private companies could not afford the rigidities of the reservation system. Similarly, though some business leaders are beginning to speak of "corporate social responsibility", none has so far declared their commitment to ending caste and gender discrimination in society.

Dalits see this as stonewalling by the upper caste-controlled businesses, and contrast it with the relative openness in the US, where nearly 50 corporations, including giants like General Motors, have joined the government in a lawsuit over affirmative action at the University of Michigan. A significant number of American corporate leaders see diversity among their employees and CEOs as necessary for understanding the market and education as necessary for that.

"I am not concerned about the caste of an employee as long he/she commands merit. But if it helps in the process of selection on merit, so be it," Murthy had said at the Infosys seminar. In India, however, merit has become an ideology justifying continued upper caste monopoly. 'Merit' is contrasted not with 'incompetence', but with 'reservation'. It is as if upper-caste monopoly in high-level jobs were a result of a genetically-coded ability to think and perform, while reservations were a 'gift' presented – at the cost of slowing down efficiency, by hiring unqualified people in order to meet social justice demands.

A strong refusal to research and discuss caste has meant ignoring the heavy disadvantages in education, language, articulation, and socialisation that Dalits and other low castes have to fight, not to mention evading the degree to which Indians access their jobs through caste and kin networks. India's growing claim to a global IT presence has only exacerbated these attitudes. If upper caste Brahmins have always seemed to live in a world of philosophy and abstraction, the electronic 'virtual' realm of IT seems somehow especially appropriate for them.

From the time caste was established in India, it meant a separation between production and the world of learning. Even during the colonial period, when Indians went abroad, they studied law and medicine or focused on passing the civil service examinations – in contrast, say, to the broad Japanese move into engineering and technology.

Now that some Indians from elite backgrounds are proving themselves in the world of IT, there seems to be little compulsion to broaden this, to make technological and educational achievement a truly national and universal aim.

The result has been not only a loss for the low caste majority, but India's loss as well. In spite of vaunted progress, India's presence in IT is a shallow one. The latest UN Human Development Report, for example, reveals that there were only 38 telephone mainlines per 1,000 people in 2001, up from 6 in 1990; only 6 cellular subscribers and 6.8 Internet users out of 1,000 in 2001, up from a base of near zero.

This compared badly even with the averages for developing countries, which had risen from a similarly insignificant base to 87 telephone mainlines, 75 cellular subscribers, and 26.5 Internet users in the same period.

Behind this halting progress lie several factors, including bad roads and electricity in the rural areas that hamper rural computer use. But the most striking failure of India's development lies in the field of education. Though literacy and school attendance have improved in the 1990s, ongoing negative attitudes of many teachers towards low-caste students have hampered efforts to change. Even in prestigious institutions professors often simply pass their 'reservation quota' students without trying to give them any significant training to help them overcome their obstacles.

The end result: a world of IT excluding the large majority of the population.**/PANOS FEATURES**

Gail Omvedt is a noted Indian sociologist, author and activist.