

## TRANSCRIPT

# "TRIUMPHS OF DALIT PEOPLE AGAINST DISCRIMINATION: AN INSIDER VIEW"

*A Conversation With Martin Macwan*

*Moderator: Dierdre Williams*

### **ANNOUNCER:**

You are listening to a recording of the Open Society Foundations, working to build vibrant and tolerant democracies worldwide. Visit us at [OpenSocietyFoundations.org](https://OpenSocietyFoundations.org).

### **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

The India program and the Education Support Program are delighted that you could come today to share in the work of Navsarjan Trust. I first learned about Navsarjan Trust about 2 1/2 years ago when I first joined the organization through the writings of a professor at Teacher's College Columbia University who does work on peace education and human rights education. And she'd written a book on human rights education in India.

And when I read about this organization, we reached out to her to ask her if she could connect us with Martin and Manjunla, who's the executive director of-- the-- the organization. And we invited them to Nepal to join our workshop there. And when they arrived, we were even more fascinated by the breadth and the depth of the work that they do. Because even though we're engaged with them around questions of education, their work spans many more areas.

And I think what is most fascinating to me about their work is just the depth of and the connectedness to the-- the grassroots and the communities that they serve in this work that they do. And so it's a pleasure to have you here today. Once we heard that Martin was gonna be in New York on other business, we thought, "We must grab him and have him share with our colleagues and some of the work that he's doing."

So without further ado, I'd like us to start. But we wanted to start with a short, three-

---

minute clip of a documentary film. It's actually the trailer to the film. And we have the filmmaker, Tane Moorey (PH), here with us today. And she will be on hand to answer any other questions that you have.

I want to stress that this is but one slice of the experience of what it means to be Dalit in India. And it focuses particularly on Dalit women. And so without further ado, I'm going to play this. And I should warn that it's quite graphic.

(VIDEO PLAYING)

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

India. Behind its (UNINTEL)--

(TAPE FADES OUT)

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Thank you very much, (UNINTEL). Martin, as I mentioned, this is but one slice of what it means to be (THROAT CLEAR) Dalit. Put this into a broader context for us and help us understand it. Because there are some people who would say caste is not alive anymore in India. Put this into context for us and help us understand what it means to be Dalit in India.

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

Well-- the (UNINTEL) that people sometimes say that it's a minority. But they (UNINTEL) around-- 16.5% of Dalit population-- of-- of India population, which means around 180 million people. (THROAT CLEAR) Well, when people say that, you know-- caste is not alive, often what they use an example is, for example, saying that the president of India was a Dalit, you know, five years back.

But this is what I want to-- share with you today that Dalit is not a homogeneous community. In India-- about 751 sub-castes are there within Dalit. And so you might-- might find people within the Dalit community who have been able to educate themselves and become a judge of a high court or a supreme court or become the president of India.

But on the other hand, you will have thousands of people, for example, we have 750 thousand people in India, who are what we call the manual scavengers. This is the lowest within the caste hierarchy, even among Dalits. And we all know that, according to 2011 census of India, only 36% of Indian population have access to sanitation systems.

That means, of 1.25 billion people, around 66% or 64% of people who don't have access to sanitation system. Where do they go to answer nature's call? So in rural society, you know, they locate, demarcate a small plot of land, one for men and one

for women, where they will defecate. And then who will clean it? It is the job of the manual scavengers.

And what they have is something like, you know, two plates with which they pick it up. And they put it into the bamboo baskets and then carry it on their heads to dump it out of the village. And when it is raining, you can see the whole thing dribbling on their faces and bodies.

This is-- India 2014, right, irrespective of p-- progress and everything we just made. But let me give you-- another example, you know-- India which is a definitely shining model and an economic region that the world cannot ignore anymore.

But within the Dalits, for example, there's a sub-caste, a community called-- (THROAT CLEAR) Mushahar (PH) (UNINTEL). And one of the principle sources of livelihood is-- eating rats from the farm. Labor community, but Dalit (UNINTEL) among Mushahar women is .46%. So only two women in 100 can read and write.

So this is the disparity, right? So when we say Dalits, you know, we must take into all this into consideration. But we-- what we saw in the film is one side of the story that there is something which is visible, the violence. But something which is not visible, so for example, you come to an Indian village, the segregated housing colonies, all Dalits are outside the village.

If you have drinking water well, all the wells are separate. All the burial grounds and cemeteries are separate. And-- well, this is-- this is-- so untouchability in this (UNINTEL) continues to be the major issue. And there, everybody suffers whether you are educated or whether you are illiterate, right? So even if a person becomes a highest police officer, he (UNINTEL PHRASE) continues to be in a segregated Dalit locality. This is what caste--

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

And so use that to talk to us about the-- the mission of Navsarjan and-- and the way in which the organization emerged. One of your core missions is ending discrimination against-- Dalits and ending untouchability, essentially. Talk to us about the genesis of your organization and give us a kind of a thumbnail sketch of the areas of work that you're engaged in.

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

It's-- a long story. To be-- but to be in brief, you know, way back in 1970-- a group of professors who also taught in the college started a center, small center, called Behavioral Science Center (UNINTEL). (THROAT CLEAR) Drawn from the learning of-- the famous American psychologist called David McClelland and his work on the human motivation and the learnings drawn from-- Paolo Fae (PH) from Brazil.

Came Sigmund Freud, the whole theory of the-- you know, exploring the unconscious

---

mind of the human. Because that is where it is all stored up. The (UNINTEL) was to educate the community, who believed that caste system basically is a creation of God, to tell them that it is not so. It is a human intervention. It's a human creation.

Well, it was believe historically, not unfounded. Because 3,000 years back, in one of the holy scriptures (UNINTEL) find the reference that the creator made the Brahmins out of the head and the warrior caste out of the arms and the tradesmen from the belly and the Shudras, the low caste, from the feet. And therefore, the-- you know, they should (UNINTEL) the other three.

No, this is a belief system in which people believed. People believe that I'm born a Dalit because I committed sins in the previous birth. And if I continue to do good work, which is fall in line, basically, then I have the chance to have a better life in the next birth. Well, this is how we started. But I remember when I went to the village for the first time, I saw an upper-caste man entering any Dalit woman's house and do anything what they want with the woman. And nobody could protest. That's what I saw with my own eyes. I was 17 then.

Well, the government said, you know, a farm worker working for (UNINTEL) must earn seven rupees, but people were only paid one rupee. You couldn't ride a bicycle. The women were not allowed to put on the footwear, you know, when they went to fetch water at the well. The man could not go in the village unless you have a turban tied on your head.

No, this was a serious kind of exploitation, you know? So out of this, we built, you know, both an economic-- kind of-- project there so that people don't have to depend so much on the so-called dominant castes, right? Because it was dependence which made them vulnerable to-- you know, exploitation. Well, when people started getting more money and, you know, they started protesting on all this. And we were able to raise that one-rupee wage to 15 rupees, you know, and more work to other villages.

The dominant caste felt that, you know, "Well, if this goes further, we're going to lose all our privileges. So do one thing just that I can finish all the leaders at one go." So (UNINTEL) in the community where I worked. And four of my colleagues were shot dead. Two died later. 18 were wounded. The whole locality was burned on fire, 1986.

Well, of course, we fought-- the legal case. We got life imprisonment for the first time in the state for 14 people, a big-- fight, which brought down the violence. But that made me realize, the biggest lesson I learned in my life is that caste is not an issue between two individuals. It's a systemic issue. And therefore, if you want to fight a system, you know, you have to have a (UNINTEL PHRASE) organization.

So 1989, we set up Navsarjan Trust, which is (UNINTEL) complete 25 years. It's working in 3,00 villages. But on education, on land reforms, implementation of minimum wages, women's leadership, primary education, vocational education.

You know, because when you are poor and marginalized, you can't say, "Okay, this is the best (UNINTEL) for me." You cannot afford closing any window, right? You have-- you have to be multi-approach kind of thing, you know? So that's what

Navsarjan is trying to do about it, right?

It does research, you know? And for the last 25 years, I think it has become a good model, you know, for others. How do you address the question of caste? And I would just say, add one more thing that the-- what is very important is the approach.

So a lot of people believe that, you know, violence is the way. And many Dalits also will say, you know, they have told me again and again that-- you know, or well, "If they rape our women, we must rape their women." And-- and the question I asked them was, "Well, if I also believed that I can rape women, I want to understand the difference between Dalit and the non-Dalit, right?"

And therefore, you know, our approach is, number one, concentration. Second is education, right? This is what the whole approach is about, and social, right? So only law doesn't help. The people who suffer must come together, right? As we saw in the film, if you don't protest, nobody takes (UNINTEL PHRASE). So the (UNINTEL) approach is a pre-condition.

## DIERDRE WILLIAMS:

So-- so talk a little bit more about that. Because you're saying only the law doesn't help. We know that litigation is one of the tools that you use. But describe for us the kinds of strategies that you use to directly challenge instances of discrimination, whether they occur in-- in terms of wages, in terms of land rights, in terms of women's rights, in terms of education.

## MARTIN MACWAN:

Well, I remember one thing is-- in (UNINTEL PHRASE) in (UNINTEL), when we started our office, some people came to the office and said-- "You know, we have a land problems. That means, we have been given land. But the land is not with us."

Actually, after independence, we had two major land reform legislations in India. And (UNINTEL PHRASE) said th-- those were one of the most revolutionary-- legislations-- (UNINTEL PHRASE). But the law said that, number one, if you are attendant, if you have been cultivating the land yourself, you get the first right to purchase.

And secondly, second law says that-- it's called Ceiling Act. You cannot have any (UNINTEL) more than a certain specific amount of land. If you have more than that, that goes back to the government for redistribution to Dalits and (UNINTEL).

Now, the most successful land reforms in India that have been ac-- actually favored the so-called dominant cast who are poor. So you have, in ind-- for example, in the U.S., one of the castes we just call (UNINTEL)-- which is the most powerful, dominant caste, you know, who were early Shudras.

And you know, they were (UNINTEL) low caste. And they were landless agricultural

---

workers. But the land reforms helped them to get land, become landowners. And therefore, they would travel to U.S.A., U.K. And today, they have become the most dominant caste.

Unfortunately, when it came to implementation of the law, for the Dalits and tribals, everybody had developed cold feet. Now, in this (UNINTEL PHRASE), you know, we surveyed 250 villages. And we found 6,000 acres of land which was given to people, say, 25 years back. But they had no possession of it.

So we wrote to the government. And government, as usual, says, "Well, we need to investigate." Everything-- anything you say to the government, the first thing is, "We need to investigate," right? Well, what we did is we did first a survey, a thorough survey which (UNINTEL) and based on the government records, so the government cannot say, "Well, this record is false."

We had drawn the figures from their own offices and came up with a petition saying, "This village, this person, by this land order, given this cut of land, which he doesn't have, or she doesn't have it. So number one, your documentation and research has to be thorough.

Nobody can challenge your authenticity. With that, we had two approaches. One, we mobilize the community. For example, you know, when we signed the petition, about 8,000 people signed the petition saying, "Oh, this land was given to us." And we were very-- (UNINTEL) saying, you know, people are ready. And then we organized the public for this march.

And when the march happened, I went to the site. There were two people. And they were the parents of one of my colleagues and 150 policemen with the guns to protect us. Everybody had the fear that g-- there's gonna be a shootout. And it was such a frustrating kind of thing. But we didn't give up. We started going back to the village and educating people that fear is most dreaded enemy. You have to address the question of fear.

When we had the second program, we got 400 people. The third program, 1,500. And we-- when we had the fourth program, there were 30,000 people on the street, you know? But that requires going house to house, door to door, you know?

When government saw that, they realized that you had to do something. And as I likely say, you know, for a politician, a person may be untouchable. But the vote is not untouchable. And every-- every political party wants that vote, right?

So they don't want to lose their votes and 16.5% of votes in India. With that third approach was we went to the federal court or as we call the high court in the state. And we filed a class action suit on the (UNINTEL). Well, within six months, we got the order that the government must appoint (UNINTEL) in all the villages on priority business immediately and hand over all the land.

It took us five years (NOISE) of struggle. But got-- but we got 6,000 acres of land for the community. Now we are fighting for maybe another 12,000 acres of land, yeah. So this is one example, right? How do you use the law? How do you mobilize the

community, right? And then how do you force the state, right, to do something which is your right? It's not something that we are asking something which is unjust.

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

I'll-- I'll ask a couple more questions and-- and then kinda open it up for colleagues. But I wanted to build on this idea of mobilizing communities. You talk about showing up at your first protest, and there were two people, and building to 30,000.

And the idea of social movements being behind the weight of the litigation that you do is extremely important. That's a lesson that we're learning here ourselves within OSF when we think of the (UNINTEL), for instance. One of the questions I want to ask has to do with-- (COUGH) the coalitions of these civil society groups, this movement behind you.

Navsarjan works not just on behalf of Dalits. You work across caste lines. You work with Muslims. You work with tribal populations. You work with what your-- your constitution refers to as other backward classes. And often, if we think in terms of-- our own work at OSF across issues and trying to build a coalition of people to speak to an issue that commonly affects them, it-- it often is difficult finding that common ground and holding people there.

So for instance, if we think of the question of inclusion in Europe, for instance, and we try to bring together Roma people with people with disabilities, s-- sometimes, we're so deeply entrenched in our own issues that it becomes hard to see past that to our common language. When you think about bringing together all these different groups, how do you find that common language? And what do you see as some of the challenges that you face in bringing them together for this kind of work?

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

Well, you see-- the (UNINTEL) caste is-- a (UNINTEL) which is usually very poor people in India. So 75% of the people who are poor, whether divided vertically, horizontally on the caste and the religious lines, right, they have the same problems.

You have (UNINTEL PHRASE) in all castes. You have women, the-- you know, victims of-- violence, domestic violence, across caste, right? You have problem of (UNINTEL) across castes. And I remember my first such meeting in-- with Manjunla in one of our, you know, religious-- where we set up a trade union of the-- of the farm workers.

Well, ev-- 90% in the village were f-- farm workers. But they were tribals. They were Dalits. And they were these so-called other backward castes, the OBC. When we had the meeting, and Manjunla were sitting. And one group was on the right side. One was on the left side. One group was on the roof.

We are all suffering from the same thing, but we cannot sit together, because that

group is lower than us. And we are higher than them. You know, this is what. Well, it took-- took us a lot of time to tell people that, unless everybody becomes equal, the right to equality cannot become a moral ground of enforcement.

To be able to say that I'm equal, I must practice equality, right? And-- that takes-- a long time. It doesn't happen overnight, right? Now, you know, what happened is, for example, we have heard those-- stories in India that, in 2004, there were very infamous communal riots in (UNINTEL).

You know, the violence that was-- perpetrated against the Muslim (UNINTEL) community, maybe more than 2,000 people dead and thousands missing still. And how many people are homeless? There's no idea about that. Now, some of the Dalit groups, it was claimed that they were instigated by the political parties and the tribals, who used to be at the forefront attacking Muslims.

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Some of our colleagues might not know about the-- the riots. Could you just give a little bit of background on that--

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

You know-- I mean, there's a famous kind of-- agitation which is going on by the rightwing parties in India to erect a big temple on the birthplace, believed to be a birthplace, of (UNINTEL), the Hindu deity. It's called (UNINTEL PHRASE).

Now, it is claimed that the Muslims, many years back, you know, thousands of years back, they demolished the temple, and they built a mosque over it. Now, in a country where, you know, Hindu is a dominant-- force, right, how can the Muslims, you know, build a mosque over the temple?

Now, supreme court, the highest body, legal body, appointed a commission of inquiry. And it went on researching several years. But there's no evidence to suggest that there was a temple underneath the mosque. Yet, in 1992, the rightwing parties mobilized thousands of people and said, "Let's head to that place, right, to-- to protest." Well, it was-- it was-- expected that it's not going to be a peaceful event. The local government, which was (UNINTEL) then, they promised to the supreme court that they will make sure that there is no law and order problem.

They betrayed the promise. And the crowd went on a rampage and destroyed the entire mosque. And that sparked the riots. And I worked personally along with my (UNINTEL) colleagues for four months in (UNINTEL PHRASE). And I remember that police brought two young kids to me. One was a three-year-old boy who could barely speak. And one was a six-month-old baby.

And they both were thrown in the street. The boy who was three years old had 32 stitches on the skull. It was, you know, open like that. And the boy said that, you



---

know, "My grandparents, my parents, and three of my sisters, they were burned alive."

The small baby, six months old, you know, they had given an iron rod which is put too hot and, you know, punctured (UNINTEL) so the-- you can see the flesh coming out, yeah? I mean, this is what level people can go to. I saw with my-- I c-- I can't forget that.

Well, again-- that same agitation went on. And in 2004, there was another bout of riots and, this time, well planned. You know, that's what the theories say. But as we say, sometimes the truth cannot be proved, because it does not (UNINTEL PHRASE) saying says you know? So the state was a perpetrator. The police did a coalition with the rioters. And there was a massive riot in (UNINTEL) especially which killed.

We met women. And women had taken shelter, you know, to the Hindu locality. Because they were neighbors for years. And Hindus said, "(UNINTEL) Come onto our campus. We'll protect you here." When they were there, they realized that only men were there. And there-- there were no women there. Because then-- they had sent away the women the previous night somewhere else.

Well, before they could think, the crowd started swelling. And at the time, these neighbors that were giving them shelter said, "Sorry, we can't protect you. Please go away from here." And women said, "Where can we go?" The crowd, you know, they raped women.

When the police were standing with the guns, they raped them and then burned them alive, putting petrol on them, hundreds of cases, right? Well, historically, Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule were the first couple in (UNINTEL), you know, who started education for the Dalits and the women.

And when Jyotirao Phule (UNINTEL) with the British that education be made accessible to everybody, irrespective of religion and caste, make a law, including Dalits. (UNINTEL), all the teachers in the (UNINTEL PHRASE) because they were Brahmins from (UNINTEL) in the community called the bris-- bristley (PH) caste. And they said, "To teach Dalits and women is against our religion. And we will not do this."

And therefore, the Muslim teachers (UNINTEL PHRASE) from the north who became the first teachers to give the knowledge. And when Gandhi began s-- s-- some of the school, it was the Muslim teachers who ran the schools. So this was the, like-- cultural and social fabric between Dalits, tribals, and the Muslims. Today, if you see the (UNINTEL) of Muslims who are there, who (UNINTEL PHRASE) communities, just like Christians.

Now, what the rightwing party has done, they have seen the-- they're trying to redefine Hinduism when they say, "Hindu is the one who is not a Muslim and who is not a Christian," a very simple dividing line. And this is creating a lot of tension and poisonous minds, right? And therefore, we believe that caste, when we work with a

---

caste, it cannot be an exclusive approach. It cannot achieve anything, no matter how successful. And you might have very good stories to comment on.

You have to have a very inclusive approach. Because ultimately, Ambedkar himself, Bhimrao Ambedkar, who was the Dalit icon during the independence movement, who w-- wrote the Indian constitution said, you know, "Caste system, you know, it's a well-designed conspiracy to divide the poor people. And therefore, (UNINTEL PHRASE) caste." And the program he gave was education, not only in terms of literacy, but education which can bring all these communities together, right? That's what I would--

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Martin, thank you for your remarks. I wanted to open it up to give other colleagues a chance to ask questions that might allow Martin to drill down into other specific areas of their work. We've only begun to scratch the surface. And I know that some of you might actually have questions.

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

And I think we didn't go around today for a round of introductions. So it would be useful if we can say the name and which program they work for.

## **TOM KELLOGG:**

Sure. Tom Kellogg (PH) East Asia program here at-- OSF. Thank you very much for your-- for your remarks and for takin' the time to speak with us today. My question has to do with-- you alluded to-- rightwing political parties-- in India. And of course, we have Prime Minister Modi now.

I wonder if you could say a little bit about-- his views on this issue. Obviously, he's directly tied-- to the rise in (UNINTEL) that you-- talked about. Is this gonna be a difficult moment for Dalit rights in general and for the work of your center in particular?

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

Well-- the politicians-- are-- are a different caste by themselves. (LAUGHTER) And agenda covers every-- every moment and every time. At one time, it was Narendra Modi who wrote a book, which they were scared and they never published. But then he made a statement that-- scavengers are doing his work. Because somehow, they had a model installation, you know-- to do that, you know, some connected this to religion. (NOISE)

---

But then they got, you know-- wives. And therefore, they stopped the publication of the book. But today, the language is totally different. Because they are in power. And therefore, they talk language of development, inclusiveness, human rights, communal harmony, all the language that the civil society was picking. They can do much better. All the vocabulary has been adopted, right?

But essentially, now what we are to see is, for example, you know, in Gujarat, where Modi was-- chief minister for three terms, that's almost 15 years. And Gujarat is one which is the-- which is, you know, by population of Dalits it is 14th in the nation in the ranking. It has 2.33% population of entire Dalits country-- country-- Dalit population of India located in Gujarat.

In terms of violence against Dalits, it is ranking number three. When it comes to violence against women, it is number two, right? Unfortunately, with the-- with the hype of the development and all that, those issues are under the carpet, right?

So we will wait and see. Number one, okay, language is not enough, right? As Gandhi and Ambedkar had a, you know, classic dilemma and c-- confrontation where Gandhi said, you know, "You have to wait until the conscience of the other person changes." And Ambedkar said, "Sorry, Mr. Gandhi. The-- the country cannot be around conscience. You need a system in place, a law in place."

So we have to see, for example, what is he doing on land reforms? What's he doing in terms of-- implementing minimum wages, you know? In Gujarat, the law may be saying that, you know, you are able to get around-- you should be paid around 200 rupees per day.

But I have entered villages just three months back, and they're paid as low as 40 rupees-- 40 rupees, yeah, 2/3 of a dollar, for eight hours of work, yeah? What he does in terms of manual scavengers. Because 750,000 people are manual scavengers today.

What is he doing on education? Now, the problem is, you see-- the schools are there. The classrooms are there. There's no problems as far as access to education is concerned (UNINTEL) for Dalit children. But discrimination and quality of education I a major problem, right? So in terms of, you know, I would say, well, Indian constitution has abolished untouchability but has fallen short to abolish caste system in general.

And we need to see, you know, that if you're talking about secular India, a global economy, a human rights kind of thing, then you have to demonstrate and say, "Okay. In terms-- this is what the program is going to bring equality." I would-- I would ch-- you know, challenge him to do so, you know, personally. And I-- that's what we've been doing in the state for, you know, last-- 25 years.

## **TOM KELLOGG:**

Thank you.

---

## DIERDRE WILLIAMS:

Thank you for your question, Tom.

## JULIA HARRINGTON REDDY:

On this issue of-- quality and inclusion in education-- are there-- oh, sorry. I'm Julia Harrington Reddy. I'm from the equality and inclusion program at the justice initiative. Actually, it's not a program. It's a cluster. But whatever. (LAUGHTER)

So-- do you have good examples in India-- of really inclusive education across castes? Or do you have inspirations from countries other than India? Or-- you know, obviously, if you go to a school, and you see all the Dalit children sitting in a corner at the back, you know that it's not inclusive.

But how do you really measure whether it's inclusive or not? I mean, even in-- in-- many societies, there have been-- studies showing that teachers are more likely to-- call on the boys than to call on the girls. Or they give different kinds of feedback that they're not even aware of affirming certain children.

And-- behavior by a certain child will be construed as a discipline problem, whereas that same behavior by another child, the teacher will just ignore it and say it's not a problem. So there's so many levels at which unequal treatment can take place, including levels of which the teachers themselves are not aware. So how do you even-- how do you begin?

## MARTIN MACWAN:

Well, it's a really tough kind of-- a call. For example, we faced a tremendous resistance even from the Dalit community when we started saying that-- caste and (UNINTEL) are the two sides of the same coin. And you cannot ignore it. So when Dalits were burning their own women alive, and we took up these cases, you know, there were incidents where there was a social (UNINTEL) excommunication of the entire (UNINTEL PHRASE) from anything that relates.

But we said that is not negotiable, number one, no matter what happens, right? Slowly, the perception of the people changed. And I must say that-- the reason we have continued to work is because there is change. When we set up the three primary schools-- nine years back, we never heard a single child in a school who was a so-called non-Dalit. Everybody said, "This is Dalit school."

Many people came and said, "You know, we (UNINTEL PHRASE) child here provided-- he will be or she will be (UNINTEL)." So they will come and go but never eat food with the other children. And we said, "No. Sorry, we cannot do that." Because education for us is not literacy. For us, it is a tool of social transformation, right?

I must say that after nine years, 20% of-- of the total students are non-Dalits today. This day, in the (UNINTEL), same (UNINTEL), you know, live together and everything. Well, you know, one of the many programs that we have promoted, we have set up-- libraries for children in the villages, more than 600 villages, we have set up children libraries. I myself, you know, write books for children. And-- we have 30,000 children who are members of the reading club. (NOISE) Every year, based on a book, we organize a theater competition of the children of the village groups.

Last year, we had around 286 teams participating from villages. And we have a 10% grace mark if the group, theater group, has more than one caste. But therefore, the children, across caste, they make one group and come, you know? It's easier (UNINTEL) learn than it is for the adults. (LAUGHTER) You know, because you know, children have no fear. They can tell you on your face who you are and, you know, no nonsense, yeah? With adults, it's-- it's very right-- right this, you know, political and all that.

Well-- we have a vocational school near (UNINTEL) where annually, we have around 700 to 750 students and 7,564 graduates in last 11 years in vocational school. Because these are youth. And we don't want to fall-- them to fall on the caste-based occupations. So we set up this. Again, now, if you see, you know, you'll have more than 10%, 15% of students-- oh, sorry. This year, there were 60% of the women who are drivers for the first time, of the entire population, I mean, entire student population, right? So this is-- it's possible.

## **JULIA HARRINGTON REDDY:**

So you-- but you do this, just to ask for clarification, you attract people from other castes by ensuring that the quality of the education itself is very high. That's it. So voluntarily, they'll come, because they see it as a route to economic advancement.

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

I mean, I always say that, you know, in-- I mean, if you ask anybody who the Dalit is, and they will say, "Oh, Dalit is the one who is the untouchable, who is-- impure." And we say, the-- you know, you have to create the perception to be Dalit is to be the best.

In fact, we redefine what a Dalit means. And we say, "Dalit is not an identity which is based on caste." Dalit is a model position of people who believe in equality. And all those people who believe in equality, all those who practice equality, and all those who protest ine-- against equality are Dalits.

And when I go to the last conference, and I asked people, "Okay, raise your fingers for non-Dalits." And everybody's shy to, you know-- (LAUGH) raise their fingers, right? So to say that I'm a non-Dalit, I should be ashamed. That should-- that should be treated as, you know, a sign of backwardness as far as we define it, right?

And if, number one, equality. But number one is a righteous approach, that equality is (NOISE) a core value of any of our programs, a nonnegotiable (UNINTEL). And-- I think-- that's what-- you see, the-- we did this major census in Gujarat in 2010, 1,596 villages, on how much untouchability (UNINTEL).

In 55% of the government school today, Dalit children are seated separately when it comes to make the meal, in Gujarat. I'm not talking of states like Bihar or (UNINTEL) or (UNINTEL), which are very, very poor and-- backward, no. This is Gujarat, Gandhi-- where Gandhi was born, right, where-- we are getting our prime minister from. That's-- that's Gujarat, right?

But-- but it's a very tough kind of thing, you know? And but I think-- you know, if I tell you stories of what children are exhibiting, you know, your heart will fall out and say, this is what you must do, you know? And-- I mean, my hope comes from the children and from the education, right?

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Are there other questions for Martin?

## **BRITTIN:**

I'm Brittin (PH) from the Asia Pacific Regional office. We-- you-- you mentioned that-- everybody wants the Dalit vote, and that that's not untouchable. And-- you know, you hear that the-- the Dalit vote is courted is counted. But then there's no accountability on these promises that are made.

So they're voted into office. And then they're never held accountable for-- for the promises they make to the Dalit communities when they get there. Do you do any work around accountability or-- can you give an instance of-- where somebody was voted into office and then sort of (UNINTEL) that in Gujarat or--

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

(UNINTEL) not the reason why the Dalit politicians don't like me, Dalit politicians, majority of them, because I have given a call for abolition of reservation from the political sphere. (LAUGHTER) Because of reservation, which is in proportion to the population, we have 84 members of parliament, out of 542 sitting in the parliament.

But when it comes to manual scavenging, when it comes to land reforms, when it comes to implementation of (UNINTEL), nobody raises their voice. Ambedkar never wanted (UNINTEL) in the first place. You know, he had (UNINTEL) something which is called separate illiterate, which means that you hold election in two-- two kind of systems in a primary.

Only Dalit can do this and only Dalit voters. You elect-- a panel. And the general

population will elect one of out that to ensure that the person elected (NOISE) is loyal to the masses. Today, out of 542 constituencies, you know, there are constituencies where Muslims are in dominance, I mean, by-- majority population, tribals are, but not a single constituency where Dalits form a majority.

And therefore, to be elected, you have to depend on the general population. And this is why-- where the vulnerability comes. In fact-- you know, when-- I mean, my biggest saddest experience was when I was-- as an (UNINTEL PHRASE) for India during the delegation of almost-- 300 people to Durban for the conference (UNINTEL PHRASE).

The (UNINTEL) India sent seven-- members of parliament and all Dalits to say that we have no untouchability, because we outlawed the whole thing. And caste is not race. And therefore, it should not be discussed here, right? And-- but that-- that, we see.

And-- well, the thing is, I mean, but that-- this content is (UNINTEL PHRASE) with the community. And people are holding them accountable, saying, "What are you doing," all right? But you see-- it is, you know, they-- they get the protection from the state, right? And-- you know, they want a candidate to be elected, you know, who may not protest at all.

This is a very, very sad-- reality. And therefore, important, unless and until we do the abolition of reservation, at least in the political sphere, they won't come to s-- senses, you know? I believe that only when you have insecurity on your head that you become creative, you know? We have to rule that, you know? I hope I have answered your question.

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Are there any questions? My-- my colleagues on the phone in London, I know it's end of day for you. But do you have any questions?

## **QUESTION:**

We're still here. Thank you very much for that-- quite inspiring but totally upsetting (LAUGH) input. But I-- I just wondered-- how much linkages there were across the country, Martin, with groups that were doing-- similar work-- on this? And does it happen usually across sectors? 'Cause you-- you're working-- on-- on a wide range of social factors. If you could give us some idea of the landscape of-- of groups doing work on-- in this area.

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

Oh, sure. That's a very good question. And-- you know, we-- I think we-- the world

---

conference against-- (UNINTEL PHRASE) beautiful platform. Groups working on the caste issue, whether you are a Dalit group or a non-Dalit group, came together. Because we said that caste is not a Dalit issue. It's a national issue.

And-- (UNINTEL), we have a very-- very serious engagement and a very consistent one with seven groups working across. So now (UNINTEL) for example, you know, we may not have our program like what I describe in other states. But now (UNINTEL) does a lot of work traveling to all other states and training the activists, not only India.

I mean, I have-- held maybe three programs in Nepal to training-- to train the Dalit activists and leaders and Nepal. We built an alliance with the Roma community-- and some of the-- so-called the half-caste groups from the African continent, right?

But that's what we do. But-- let me just say that-- (UNINTEL), we realized that-- you may not have visible events like conferences, which becomes a platform where people can come together. How do you keep up the visibility? And therefore, we set up two large institutions in India. One is called the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, which is a prime body of doing research on the the (UNINTEL) caste.

In 10 years, it has become a very, very powerful body and including government of India seeking its help to, you know, formulate their own policies and also the funding agencies, you know, like UNICEF. We had-- you know, large conference with UNICEF where some of the officers said that caste was not a (UNINTEL) to them.

And then we put that data and evidence. We commissioned, you know, a study. And then they felt that caste is something that they must include, several, several examples. So yes, we have a very powerful and very consistent program. The second organization we set up-- is called Dalit Foundation.

It's a small funding agency which is helping very, very small groups across the country into f-- almost 14 states. If I remember correctly, we have around 267 partners, right? Whereas we-- not only we give some financial assistance but a perspective on how do you work on the question of caste. So let's have a uniform approach, you know? Then the impact is-- much better. Well, that's what I could say. And I hope I have answered the question.

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

And-- and where does the--

## **QUESTION:**

Thank you very much.



---

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Where does the Dalit Foundation get its money from?

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

Well-- initially, you know, the first kind of-- 10 grants that we gave, we raised the money from the community. So we went to several villages and asked the people whether people would donate. And people m-- donated almost, like, half a million rupees, you know? And-- that were the first grants that came.

But then (UNINTEL) Foundation came in a big way and gave us a grant and (UNINTEL) also, right? And then definitely, the (UNINTEL) joined, (UNINTEL) caste. And there was a small contribution also from, I think, American Jewish World Service, AJWS. And-- I think now we are trying to get in touch with (UNINTEL), you know, a German-- thing.

So now slowly, you know-- it's-- it's been coming in. But now we are making a huge kind of reorganization of Dalit Foundation with, you know-- every partner, say, maybe working in 20 villages. (COUGH) We-- we are training two-- two volunteers from each other's villages in vocational education at our center and also in social perspective. So end of the year, you'll have a large cadre of volunteers in every village. You know, that's the kind of approach we are taking nationally.

## **SANJAY PATEL:**

I did have one other p-- question. So my name is Sanjay Patel. I-- I work with the public health program here at OSF. You mentioned reservations and your concern related to them. Does that also-- does that concern also apply to the reservations in the civil service and in educational institutions?

Because you know, I mean, it's a very controversial subject in India. And-- with respect to education, because-- and I apologize for missing-- the first portion of your-- talk, because I had another meeting. But I suspect that you talked about the importance of education as an equalizer. And so I'd just be curious as to get your thoughts on reser-- quotas-- within the educational and civil service-- sectors.

## **MARTIN MACWAN:**

Well, I've-- I've been visiting scholar to several universities in India and-- including National Judicial Academy, where we train judges and everything. The first question of the presentation is what are you-- what are your thoughts on reservation, you know?

Bec-- it becomes very contentious-- issue in India. But I say-- my personal view so far

is reservation in education (COUGH) and civil services are cancer. So far this caste is going to remain in the country, the reservation is going to continue.

Let me say why-- why I have taken that position, you know? Almost 50% of children-- of the Dalit community, they drop out before they reach grade seven. And the girl child dropout rate is something like 64%, right? If you don't have really strong constitutional measures like reservation, people stand no chance, right?

You-- you know, Gandhi and (UNINTEL) reached first base (?) on conscience, right? Let me give you an example. Some villages have a program-- s-- civil society program saying, "The best-performing students of the village will be honored."

So they'll be given a prize and a bouquet and, you know, a lecture and everything. Well, in that village, when it happened that a Dalit child was the first one to stand apart in the exams, they stopped the program, (LAUGHTER) right? Now, so the prejudices run very deep, right?

And I think so far as those prejudices are going to concern, that protection is to-- needs to continue. I mean, today, Dalit-- you know-- as a social class, has made a difference because it is representation in-- in terms of its proportion in civil services, right? And that's very important, right?

So my views are like this, very clear, that they will continue so far as the caste continues. And therefore, the country must resolve to abolish the caste, right? And once the caste is not there, we don't n-- need reservations. In India, now you'll hear demands from Brahmins who have applied for reservations saying, you know, "We are the backward class," right?

Or the (UNINTEL) community, which is the largest group in-- in Rajasthan, their long (UNINTEL), you know, staying, you know-- "We-- we are also, you know-- we need reservation, because we are-- we are poor," right? And so instead of abolition of reservation, you know, now the counter demand is happening, where m-- everybody's saying, you know, "We need reservation," because that is the only-- constitutional measure which guarantees equality, equal opportunity, which is a fundamental right, you know, 15-4 or something in-- in the constitution, right? So you know--

## **SANJAY PATEL:**

But it's interesting to hear you say that-- reservations will continue as long as caste continues. 'Cause in the U.S., the experience has been different in a sense that affirmative action programs-- are starting to get rolled back, even though, you know, it's clear racism still exists in this country. So it's interesting to hear you confident that this will continue-- even though the politics may shift and change. You're confident that this system will remain intact.

---

## DIERDRE WILLIAMS:

Yeah. I mean-- I've been interacting with a lot of groups in the U.S. also and learned that they're very happy about the U.S. policy, right? And-- and-- they say the same things, you know, that because Obama can become the president, that doesn't mean the end of discrimination, of-- racial discrimination. The disparities continue, you know?

And I think there are several studies-- you know? And yes, I mean-- it's a very, very tough calling, you know? You know-- you know-- how do you-- handle a country with 1.25 billion-- population with such diversity? But unless you have a system in place, no way we'll guarantee equal-- equal rights to-- to the people. You know, that's the very sad reality.

## DIERDRE WILLIAMS:

Last burning questions?

## QUESTION #2:

(THROAT CLEAR) Martin, I think we know each other. This has been a republican program and soon to be working with India Program too. Do you have an intimate knowledge of the Dalit politics in terms of the civil society movement that are happening within India?

If you look at next five to 10 years, what do you think are the most challenging issues that are dividing the community as a whole? And what do you think are some of the sort of weaknesses of the movement in terms of what it want-- what it set out to achieve and (UNINTEL PHRASE) mobilization of what it's been able to achieve?

## MARTIN MACWAN:

Well-- I think one of the major challenges that we are facing is this-- talk around the corner that the new government wants to bring an amendment in the constitution to do away with a concept called secularism, (NOISE) right? Already, the nonpolitical bodies, such as RSS, are very strong and kept on saying that there's nothing wrong in saying-- claiming that we are a Hindu nation, right?

One of the (UNINTEL PHRASE) of the-- you know, the-- the (UNINTEL) Hindu (UNINTEL) during the (UNINTEL PHRASE) was-- caste system, abolition of caste is a violation of our rights. That's the kind of position they took. So you know, those are those kind of challenges.

But to me, at the ground level, the challenge is something in education. The divide in society was between those who have and those who did not. Now, technology, access

to technology and quality education is becoming the-- platform for this increasing gap in society, right?

So I mean, government policies such as in Gujarat, like-- no formal evaluation in the school and automatic-- (UNINTEL) of the student until you reach grade seven. Now, nobody knows what progress the student makes or the teachers do in the class. Now, these children, most government schools are meant for Dalit, tribal, and the poor children.

Those who have money, they go to private schools. So (UNINTEL PHRASE) come to (UNINTEL) we see science, mathematics-- English. And they're totally out of (UNINTEL), right? And this is where, you know, I mean, al-- almost all the girls drop out, you know, in those-- you know, in those villages where the school is above grade seven.

So these are my concerns, you see? And-- the other concern is everybody talking that, you know, you should have a development model. The thesis is, if you have-- if you generate more capital, it may g-- you know, flow to the-- the stream downwards something to the poor people.

Well-- experience (UNINTEL) is that that doesn't happen. That doesn't happen. You know, unless you have a very, very strong constitution measures, like, that doesn't happen. So I mean, there is a growing-- protest against-- reservation, you know, against some of the policies-- and the programs.

## QUESTION #2:

Social protection programs.

## MARTIN MACWAN:

Right. But-- that is where, you know, people must have to come together. And I will say that-- the danger we will run if Dalit becomes an exclusive kind of-- identity in society. No. It must be an inclusive, integrated approach and, therefore, shadow caste as we call it, tribes, the Muslims you know, and the gender (?), you know, all must come together, right?

And-- I mean, really, the Dalit community also the kind of opportunity they voice will have the (UNINTEL PHRASE) does not have, right? And so you know, those are the major challenges, you know, we are going to face, right? Slowly, people, you know, are no more talking about land reforms.

All the land is easily given. I mean, government has policies that if the industry wants to come and set up something, they do not even need permission of the government to turn the land into non-agriculture. They s-- may start industry and then apply.

But if a person wants to do that, it takes several years. You know-- and-- and-- and

look, you know-- you know, the which is the kind of, you know, Nano car, which is the kind of-- you know, data companies (UNINTEL) the car to Gujarat, government gave them 1,100 acres of land at 1/10th of the market price and then thousand gross, which is 100,000 million rupees as a capital incentive.

Of course, they call it a soft loan. And the rate of interest is 0.1% with a 20-year moratorium. You don't have to pay interest. But the scavengers, if they want to go to the bank and ask for a small loan of 5,000 rupees for their (UNINTEL), there must be an interest, which is 7%.

But this is-- these-- these are-- these will not be policies, you know, which are, you know-- so people believe, "No, no, let's have development," you know? And I think that's way back in-- you know, Gandhi and the congress passed a resolution that-- "Let us put aside the agenda of the social reform and focus on your national independence."

Because when we are independent, we have the power to make the laws what we want. And we'll achieve equality in no time. And Ambedkar said, "Look at the history of the world. It has never happened anywhere." (LAUGH) You have to have a parallel of the (UNINTEL) independence movement and the social reform agenda, right? And I think he (UNINTEL) to be right, right? So that's what I would say.

## QUESTION #2:

Thank you.

## DIERDRE WILLIAMS:

I wanted to kinda exercise my prerogative as chair, moderator, and pick up that last thing and just ask you, "What do you see, given the development over the next five years, given the political scene that's now set with Narendra Modi ascending to the prime ministership? What do you see that meaning for the three-prong strategy that you (UNINTEL) that Navsarjan has going forward?

Do you see more of a focus on strengthening and educating civil society? Do you see media playing in more? Do you see litigation featuring more prominently? Or-- is it kinda hard to tell? Or do you see other tools coming onboard?

## MARTIN MACWAN:

Well, definitely. I mean, one of the major-- things I see coming is the-- training and empowering of the youth. You know, and then for (UNINTEL), for example, Ambedkar has started a peace corps kind of thing-- force for equality. It's called (UNINTEL), way back in 1947.

We are trying to re-strengthen that in Gujarat, right? And-- so we are training cadres

---

of youth who are training to vocational education and so-- social perspective. And they are volunteers, you know, in the villages. So therefore, something happens in the village, they are the one who will take action on that immediately and (UNINTEL PHRASE) organization, right? So empowering of the youth is a major program in-- in terms of employment and-- and social education.

But my biggest second problem is the quality education. Because if the younger generation which is coming, the children, if they are going to continue to be discriminated, there's very little hope, right? And no matter what happens, somehow, that we must attack on a priority basis and see that there is no discrimination when it comes to children in the public schools, right? I would say that.

And third, definitely, you know, we-- I-- I (UNINTEL) with you that the-- the tools that (UNINTEL) society and the strategy that they may use to continue with the discrimination, those can be my tools and strategies when I'm talking of the liberation, right?

And to me, therefore, you know, (UNINTEL) we have been advancing this thing that, without women's leadership, no social movement can succeed. And therefore, let women take the leadership. Because that's what we are seeing from experience that all the initiatives you see have been coming from the women.

Not because of any other reason, bec-- but they are the one-- I believe that, you know, to be able to fight oppression, you need a very deep kind of experience. And women, as a group, are the ones who are the most oppress-- oppressed section in Indian society, right?

Well, that, I think, is to us, is something nonnegotiable. And definitely, a continuous process of political education, of what's happening, right? And-- how do we use the technology to-- because now, you know, you-- you can't have those programs like I used to do 35 years back, going to the village and l-- living there for three days and three nights.

You have to use technology and-- means of mass communication to be effective, right? So how does one do that? I think those kind of search-- would be, you know, I think are priorities and list-- I mean, agenda kind of a thing in future.

## **DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Thank you, Martin. Unless there are last burning questions, Martin, I want to say thank you so very much again for coming and sharing with us. We look forward to thinking about how we might c-- communicate going forward to think about lessons that we could continue learning from you. But it's been a pleasure, I think I speak on behalf of all of us, to hear about the work that you're doing. And we look forward to hearing more of it going forward.

---

**MARTIN MACWAN:**

Thank you.

**DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

And we wish you safe travels.

**MARTIN MACWAN:**

Thank you. My pleasure. Thank you. Thank you.

**DIERDRE WILLIAMS:**

Thank you. (APPLAUSE)

(OFF-MIC CONVERSATION)

\* \* \*END OF TRANSCRIPT\* \* \*