

# IT'S TIME INDIA PAID REPARATIONS TO ITS DALITS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

India as a nation owes a huge debt to Dalits — upon whose backs its civilisational columns have been raised. Dalit talent, skill and stamina make India one of the most desirable places for outsiders, including the British. Various art forms, literature, music, poetry originate from the Dalit, Adivasi and Shudra worlds. In their inventive genius and performative zeal, the Dalits have hymned and hummed to the rhythms of their tragedies, preserved their culture amidst the torture of untouchability.

They have cried and prayed, protested and fought back. In all of this, they have paved the path for new forms of sensorial experiences.

Almost all the 'classical' Indian art forms have Dalit origins. There are examples of Dalit art being stolen and Brahminised. And to stop the Dalits from reclaiming the same, they were barred from practising and participating in many of the arts.

This eliminated any competitive edge that Dalit talent might have posed. That is why, even today, many classical art events are bereft of Dalit participation.

Even in other innovations, the Dalits have helped science flourish and rationalism take precedence. In their spiritual practices and prayers, the belief in the Almighty is rooted in the essence of enlightenment.

How then do we reconcile our past mistakes of murdering the Dalit existence so as to remedy the situation for future work?

One possible way is to think about reparations, "making amends for the wrongs one has done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged". It is one of the means to correct the past and on-going injustices. Reparations can be categorised in three broad types:

**Moral reparation:** Acknowledgement of past mistakes and seeking forgiveness to establish a healing process for the wounded souls and traumatised minds.

**Spiritual reparation:** Giving leadership and respect to communities whose attempts at spirituality were declared a crime.

**Conditional reparation:** This is a reparation in the form of money and material reimbursements. It flows from the social and economic factors that stole the land, labour and value of an entire community.

Reparations are an international demand of colonised countries. The Lancet Commission on Reparations was set up at Harvard's Medical School to examine the "moral, legal, economic, historical, and political evidence for various global claims to reparations and redistributive justice". Alongside the African Americans, Roma, Caribbean Slavery, victims of India's caste system were also given a hearing. The Indian case was presented by the economists Sukhadeo Thorat and Amit Thorat.

Reparation facilitates an occasion for the country to come together to reflect on the enormous weight of unpaid labour by the Dalits, who put their sweat and blood to raise the nation's

economy, from farm to industries. The soul of the country continues to be torn. To stitch it back we need redistributive justice and reparations to piece it together. Redistributive justice in the form of land redistribution and taking into account the toil of Dalit women's wombs.

In the fiestas of protests and justice movements, the Dalits have not yet come around demanding reparations. It is a chance to show a mirror to the society that continues to see anti-Dalit violence and hatred due to its own intrinsic insecurities.

These insecurities have been built over generations. Reparations are an opportunity for us to come together as a nation and help rebuild the broken promise that Independence held out.

Each institution in this country is implicit in this crime of Dalit violence. This has easily transfused into the structures that hold this country together.

Representation through reservation is just one way to render justice to the oppressed castes whose labour and dignity were reduced to nothing by the ruling castes of India.

As a nation, we need to be able to grieve collectively to overcome. This country can mourn for the victims of the Nazi genocide, even the victims of the India-Pakistan Partition, but it becomes hard as stone at the mere mention of atrocities against Dalits.

To change this blatant apathy, we need to start anew. The constitutional promises through reservations and land reforms were one of the few ways for us to get together. But these remain hotly contested. Reparation is one of the most viable ways to secure justice for all.

**Suraj Yengde, author of Caste Matters, curates the fortnightly 'Dalitality' column**

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