

## ADAPTING COMMUNICATION TO EMPOWER DALIT WOMEN: A CASE STUDY OF DALIT STHREE SAKTHI

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### ABSTRACT:

The word Dalit has been originated from Sanskrit word 'dal', which means broken, ground-down, downtrodden, oppressed, persecuted, or exploited. The roots of the term Dalit can be traced back to the *Purusha Suktam* of *Rig Veda* (see notes) where we find the first reference of the caste system. The people who were formerly referred as untouchables or *harijans* (see notes) are today increasingly adopting the term Dalit as a name for themselves. It is worth mentioning here that Dalit refers to one's caste rather than class. Since long in India, a few menial castes associated with the extreme impurity and pollution connected with their traditional occupations has born the stigma of untouchability. The so called Dalits are the people falling outside the traditional four-fold caste system in India: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra. Dalits form the outcastes of the society and are considered tainted and polluting. Therefore, Dalits have been both physically and socially excluded from the rest of society. It has been 67 years since India gained independence. But even now, in most parts of India, Dalits are exploited in various forms. As a result, many organizations have mushroomed in all corners of India to address the issues of Dalits. The purpose of this study is to examine the key role played by communication to empower Dalit women with the help of a case study of *Dalit Sthree Sakthi* (DSS), the only organization in Andhra Pradesh that works exclusively for the empowerment of Dalit women.

**KEY WORDS:** Dalit, dalit women, communication, empowerment, Dalit Sthree Sakthi, untouchable, India

### INTRODUCTION

The roots of Dalits can trace their history perhaps to the earliest civilization which flourished on the soil of India (Paswan & Jaideva 2009, 11). The Indus civilization had several classes of people, separated from each other widely both on social and economic basis. In this civilization there were only those who ruled and who served. In the stream of time, in Rig Vedic period, we find the first literary evidences of class-distribution in the society (Ibid, 16). Undoubtedly, Dalits in India still form a poor lot. The historical elucidation of the term Dalit, i.e., the oppressed can now be changed to the poor. History has referred to Dalits as people without a history of their own. Dalits have been marginalized as objects in India rather than being treated as its subjects who have equal rights as other citizens to all the benefits.

According to 2011 Census, Dalits represent a community of 201.3 million, constituting 16.61% of the population in India (<http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com>; [www.censusindia.gov.in](http://www.censusindia.gov.in)). It means one out of every six Indians is a Dalit. Due to their caste identity, Dalits regularly face discrimination and violence which prevent them from enjoying the basic human rights and

dignity promised to all citizens of India. Caste-based social organization extends beyond India, finding corollaries in Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh etc.

According to Annamalai, in contemporary India, there has been a shift in ideology around Dalit's status from being passive victims of discrimination to active advocates for their rights (Theresa 2008, 4). He states, the Dalit movement "emphasizes asserting a separate identity and inculcating pride in Dalit cultural traditions". In order to fortify the basic human rights of Dalits, in India, educated Dalits use a variety of visible means to raise awareness about their situation. As a result, many NGOs have mushroomed over a period of time to address the problems faced by Dalits.

Untouchability has been abolished in India, according to Article 17 (Chowdhury *et al* 1992, 220) of the Constitution of Republic of India which has come into force with effect from January 26, 1950. Article 17 forbids the practice of untouchability in any form. The word *Untouchable*, meaning social disabilities historically imposed on certain classes of people by reason of their birth in particular castes, has not been defined anywhere in the constitution. Yet, Dalits or the so called untouchables continue to be treated as impure members of Indian society.

According to Moses Seenarine, for Dalit women, caste empowerment is more important than gender empowerment. However, in his opinion, caste and gender are interrelated and both are of great consequence (Seenarine 2009, 4). He holds that the education and employment gains that Dalit women have made since independence are due to female resistance to oppressive forces (Ibid, 42).

Melkote *et al* observed (Melkote and Steeves 2001, 348) that the construct of empowerment identifies the underlying constraints in the third world development and helps to articulate a more appropriate and useful role for Development Support Communication (DSC) and DSC personnel. In India, atrocities on Dalit women and girls are taking place despite the implementation of the special enactment of SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989. While Dalits are being oppressed in the villages from one side, Dalit women and the girls are being raped and exploited in the urban areas from the other side. The vicious sexual culture that is spreading in the wake of globalization is taking a toll of the Dalit girls and women. The number of incidents of sexual violence that India has seen in the recent past establishes this fact. Judicial administration and police establishment have not acted in any serious way to put an end to these atrocities. A special act by name "Prevention of Atrocities Act" has been implemented in India exclusively to address Dalit issues. But, even now Dalits have to struggle for its effective implementation. At this juncture, there has been a need for the volunteer organizations to come forward and address this issue. No doubt many NGOs have been functioning for this purpose. But, in the past no organization was specific to address the issues of Dalit women and girl children. *Dalit Sthree Sakthi* (DSS) claims to have achieved reasonable success in this endeavour. This case study provides the evidence that how Dalit women have been empowered utilizing the effective means of communication.

### Working Definition of Dalit

The working Definition of Dalit considered for this study is the one given by R.K. Kshirsagar: *Dalit Means all those people of different castes and sub-castes among the depressed classes who were traditionally subjected to invidious discriminations on grounds of untouchability, and categorized as the untouchables, downtrodden, exterior classes- depressed classes or the scheduled castes.* (Kshirsagar 1994, 4)

### Statement of the Problem

Even though Article 17 of Indian constitution has abolished untouchability, Dalits are deprived of their basic human rights. Dalits have been facing so much of exploitation in many and varied forms. There is a need to educate and empower the deprived Dalits. Communication as a powerful weapon plays a vital role in empowering Dalits, especially the Dalit women. By documenting and communicating the success stories of the role played by communication in the empowerment of Dalits, this social evil could be eradicated to a great extent.

### Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to address the following questions:

- To find out how *Dalit Sthree Sakthi* has empowered Dalit women by adapting communication.
- To examine the success stories of DSS and the role played by communication for its success.
- To find out the share of each type of media in focusing the issues related to Dalit women.
- To formulate suggestions & recommendations based on the findings.

### Significance of the Study

Empowerment of Dalit women is the need of the hour in India; because, it not only enhances the human and economic development, but indirectly brings awareness on many social evils that prevail in contemporary India. It is evident that in such a vast state of India like Andhra Pradesh a single NGO named *Dalit Sthree Sakthi* has been successfully instrumental by adapting communication in addressing the issues related to Dalit women. This study is particularly useful for NGOs, grass root activists, and policy makers who are working for Dalit women throughout India.

### Methodology

In this research, survey method has been used to collect the data that is quantitative in nature. All the success stories of *Dalit Sthree Sakthi* since 2005 have been reviewed to find the key role played by communication for the empowerment of Dalit women. Instrument of questionnaire has been used to measure the effect of adapting communication to empower Dalit women. A total of 40 victims (Dalit women) have been interviewed for seeking information regarding the effectiveness of communication adapted by DSS.

### About Dalit Sthree Sakthi

*Dalit Sthree Sakthi* (DSS) is the only organization in the state of Andhra Pradesh that works exclusively for the empowerment of Dalit women. According to Ms. Jhansi Geddam, the convener of this organization, *Dalit Sthree Sakthi* took shape as an organization in the year 2005 with the goal of organizing Dalit women in the state of Andhra Pradesh to struggle for their rights and entitlements. According to her, the successive governments and political parties have

been viewing Dalit women only as vote banks and attempting to woo them with various monetary schemes and on the doles of various welfare measures; it has been thought necessary to awaken Dalit women to fight for justice and self respect rather than for monetary benefits. The idea took its root in the course of 'Campaign on Violence against Women' that took place during November 2004 in the background of International Campaign on Violence Against women. Since 2005, DSS has been implementing programs aimed at uniting the Dalit women onto one platform and facilitating their empowerment so that they can defend their rights by questioning all violations. DSS claims to have achieved reasonable success in this endeavor.

### **Vision & Mission of Dalit Sthree Sakthi**

- A society in which Dalit women have real equality and equity in dignity, rights and resources.
- To capacitate Dalit women leaders to fight against oppression of caste, class and gender and enhance rights and entitlements of women.

### **Objectives of Dalit Sthree Sakthi**

- To capacitate Dalit women and girl children with knowledge and skills to fight against untouchability, discrimination, intra and inter community violence and to access justice.
- To access quality education for Dalit girl children and make them potential leaders.
- To support and facilitate Dalit women to access rights and entitlements in civil society and government.
- To establish linkages with likeminded Dalit women organizations, networks and movements at State, National and International levels to influence policies and strategies related to Dalit women and girl children.
- To document and publish stories and case studies of resilience and leadership among Dalit women and girl children.

### **Communicating problems of Dalit Women**

The entire activities of Dalit Sthree Sakthi since 2005 are directed towards reaching the goal of Dalit women empowerment. Due to the facilitation of DSS, the Dalit women formed themselves into women collectives and their awareness on Dalit women situation has increased tremendously. Now, they are able to come forward in public and demand justice. They are also able to expose the loop holes in the administration of justice that failed in rendering justice to them. In the public hearings the way ordinary Dalit women started articulating their issues, the failure of the system in the presence of large gathering has been revealing the fact. The government officials and various other delegates were at awe while the Dalit women were speaking. In the past, Mr. Praveen Kumar, Commissioner, Social Welfare of the State of Andhra Pradesh, appreciated the Dalit women and the DSS for facilitating them. Dalit women collectives were able to assert their rights in many incidents and see that many government schemes were implemented. In East Godavari and Krishna districts the Dalit women fought against the liquor shops in their villages and got them removed. Many activities of women collectives were reported in the print and electronic media. One leading TV channel in A.P., TV9 selected Mrs. Mariamma of Machilipatnam women collective for the TV's annual *Naveena* award for the successful women in achieving women empowerment. This is a credit for women collectives and DSS. Likewise, DSS activities for the protection of Dalit girls achieved recognition. The



pamphlet printed and distributed by DSS in the campaign for the Dalit girl child was printed by leading Telugu news paper *Andhra Jyothi*. This shows the importance given to DSS and its activities by the media. The entire campaign on Dalit girl child was successful by the active participation of members of Dalit women collectives. Similarly Dalit women collective members are active in monitoring the working of government schools and social welfare hostels. In the incidents of day to day domestic violence that goes on in the Dalit colony, the women collective members intervene and resolve. Few years ago, it was a difficult exercise to enroll Dalit women as members of women collectives and to explain them about their rights. But over a period of time, they are not only articulated but are able to take up struggles and resolve problems on their own. This is the result of continuous facilitation by DSS.

In order to adapt communication, various programs have been organized by DSS. Few such programs with their impact are appended below:

- *Annual District Conferences:* District level Round Table conferences (RTC) have been held at regular intervals on varied themes such as *Violence on Dalit Women and Girl Children*. The impact of such conferences is as follows:
  - A platform for Dalit women to demand justice was made available.
  - Much visibility through print and electronic media was made possible
  - Increase in the levels of confidence among the victims and witnesses.
  - Increase in the accountability of the concerned departments.
  - Good rapport developed with the district officials for the DSS teams at district levels.
  - Much clarity for the women collectives, increase in the confidence levels.
  - Dalit women felt the need of their effective role.
- *State annual Conferences:* Many state level public hearings such as *Public Hearing on Violence against Dalit Women and Girl Children* have been organized by DSS since 2005. The Convener-DSS, Ms. Jhansi Geddani gave a brief introduction of the objectives of the public hearing as follows:
  - Communicating the agony of the victims in accessing justice and the psychological trauma they are undergoing after the violence.
  - To communicate the violations to the concerned and appropriate mass media.
  - To analyze the way justice system is functioning and the feelings of impunity of perpetrators of violence.
  - To sensitize the public at large by means of communication about the way justice system operates in case of Dalit women.
  - To share the situation of elected Dalit women representatives of *Panchayat Raj*.
- *Workshops:* Many workshops have been conducted by DSS for Dalit women varying from *Workshop for Dalit Panchayat Raj Leaders* to *Workshop for Dalit women for their Land and Livelihood*.
- *Awareness Programs:* Through awareness programs, DSS informed Dalit women about the schemes such as loans @ 0.25 paisa. It has been an endeavor for DSS to impart knowledge on the government budget and their share in the budget as per *Scheduled Caste Sub Plan* and *Tribal Sub Plan*. Women collectives have been formed under the leadership of Dalit women in all the 1200 villages and slums in the working area of DSS. The Dalit colonies are under the continuous watch of these women collectives. They in turn identify the needs of the Dalit women and girl children such as ration cards, old age

pensions, widow pensions, disabled pensions, houses, lands, issues in the community centers & schools etc., and make every effort to resolve them by submitting representations to the concerned officials. If the problems are not sorted out, through print and electronic media they give much publicity to these problems.

- *Focusing the issues through media:* DSS has been effectively utilizing the services of various media to resolve the problems. The details of few incidents of violence on Dalit women, which have been resolved with the focusing of the issue through media are appended below:
  - Mass attack on Dalit Colony – The case of mass attack on Dalit colony that took place on September 22, 2010 on the eve of *Ganesh Festival* has been focused by the print and electronic media with the intervention of DSS. As a result, the accused have been arrested. Also, the damages have been assessed and ensured the payment of compensation. A similar case of mass attack on tribal that took place on September 20, 2010 at *Dusari Kunta Thanda* in *Ranga Reddy* district of *Andhra Pradesh* was focused through print media with the intervention of DSS.
  - Sexual Exploitation and Attack – Many cases of sexual exploitation and attack on Dalit women have been focused through the print and electronic media with the intervention of DSS.
- *Dalit Sthree Sakthi* has been effectively utilizing the potentiality of mass media to focus many issues like cheating in the name of love, harassment and attack; gang rape and attack; abetment to suicide; sexual exploitation by close relatives; caste abuse and harassment; suspicious death of Dalit women; discrimination of Dalit and tribal girls in residential school; sexual exploitation of insane minor girls etc.
- *Building up teams of women collectives by means of communication:* DSS has envisioned and implemented an idea to facilitate Dalit women to form into collectives and train them to think, decide and act independently in such a way that there is no leader and the led, but all should take decisions collectively. The task was a bit arduous and in the beginning the team of DSS had a very tough time for sundry reasons. Firstly, the Dalit women were never exposed to sit and discuss things on their own. Secondly, it was discouraging them to know that DSS is not sanctioning loans or grant money or implement welfare schemes. Thirdly, their husbands and caste elders were discouraging the women to take part in social activities. An effective communication was the only solution to overcome all these odds. As envisaged with the implementation of effective communication practices DSS could achieve increased awareness among the Dalit women. Presently, DSS operates with women collectives in 1200 villages including the slums with 5-7 members.

### Findings and Interpretation

Some of the important findings of the study are appended below:

- Most of Dalit women are less educated and mostly they hail from rural areas.
- In India, despite so much of development, caste and gender prejudices continue to be as dominant as ever before. Even today, in the so called era of modernization, there is a wide spread prejudice based on caste and patriarchy against Dalits and women in general, and Dalit women in particular.
- Undoubtedly, it is the prevailing caste and secondary status of women in the society that is largely responsible for violation of human rights of Dalit women. Gender concerns and Dalit women empowerment was at the top of all activities of DSS.

- It is a stark reality that a large number of Dalit women are still engaged in unclean, inferior occupations such as sweeping, scavenging and working in dumping grounds, rag picking and also in prostitution. The incapacity of Dalit women to assert their rights is at the root of the problem.
- By reviewing the documents, it has been evident that DSS has focused the issues through various media. The most effective medium has been the print medium with a share of 58% of the total cases while New Media took the last place with a share of 4%. The graphical representation of the share of each medium to focus the issues of Dalit women is placed as Fig1.
- Fig 2 denotes the graphical representation of the total number of cases and the cases focused through various media by DSS from the year 2006 to 2012.
- The age groups of victims participated in the survey has been illustrated in Fig 3.
- Similarly, Fig 4 and Fig 5 illustrate the education and geographic levels, respectively of the victims participated in the survey.
- Fig 6 denotes the effectiveness of communication in the opinion of the participant victims of the survey.

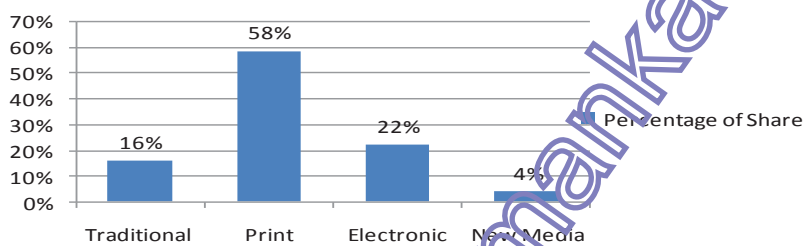


Figure1: Share of Each Medium in Focusing the Issues of Dalit women

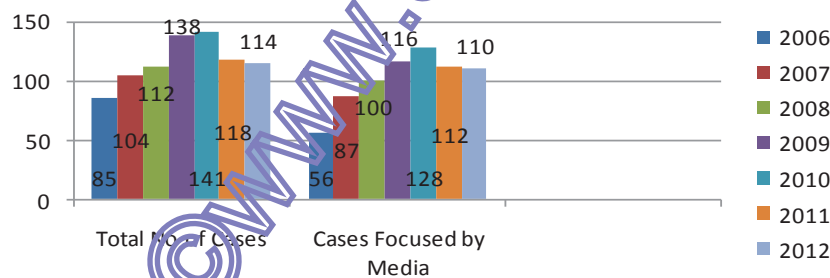


Figure2: Total No of Cases Vs Cases Focused by Media

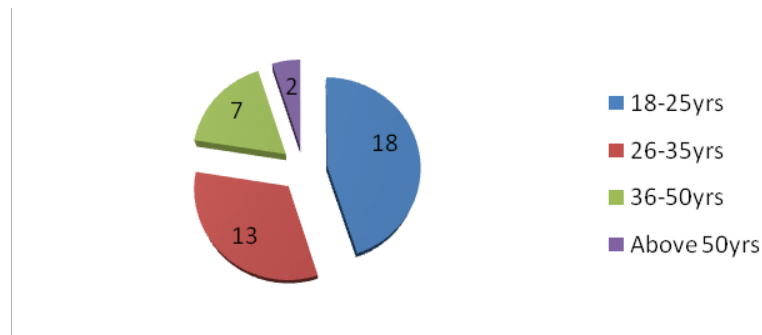


Figure 3: Age Group of Victims Participated in the Survey

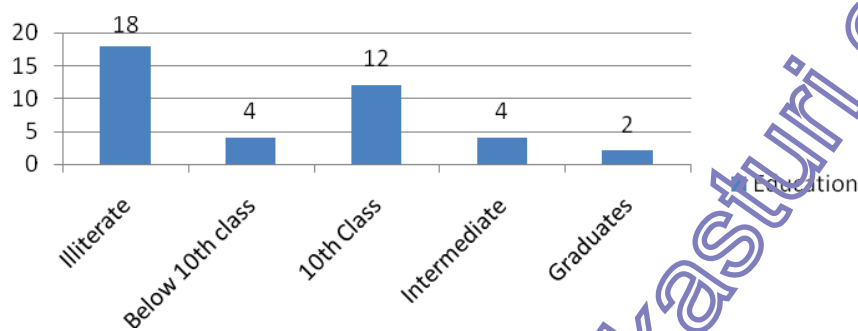


Figure 4: Education Levels of Victims Participated in the Survey

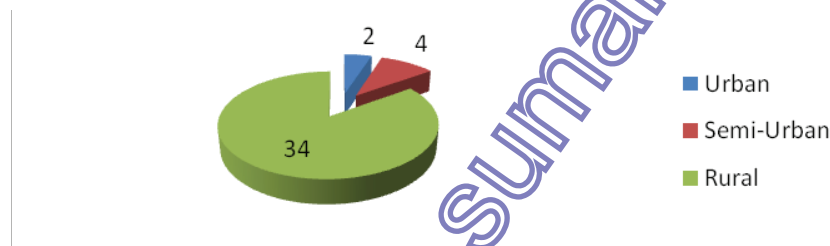


Figure 5: Geographic Levels of the Victims Participated in the Survey

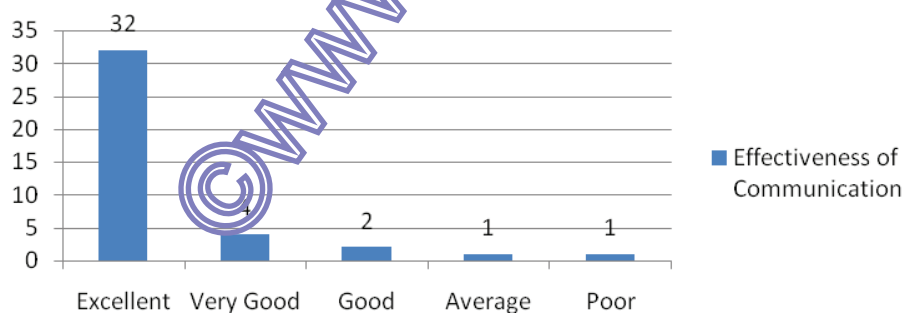


Figure 6: Effectiveness of Communication in the Opinion of Participants



### Suggestions & Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following suggestions and recommendations are made:

- The government of India provided reservation to Dalit women to occupy positions of power in the *Panchayat Raj* institutions. But, this reservation for Dalit women has been accepted only in form, not in substance. There is a need to establish communication channels between Dalit women who are not aware of their rights and the governing bodies.
- By this study, it is evident that the capability of the traditional media, which is close to the rural folks, has not been utilized, effectively. It is suggested that the immense potentiality of traditional media may be utilized by organizations like DSS to educate Dalit women.
- The media channels which focus the issues on Dalit women also need to analyze the root causes of such atrocities and give a wide publicity to prevent such things.
- In information sharing among the masses, mass media has a key role to play. As far as the issues of Dalit women are concerned, there is a need for mass media to focus on such issues which the Dalit are deprived of.
- By this study, it is evident that *Dalit Stree Sakthi* has achieved a lot in these eight years. The governing bodies are required to encourage and patronize such organizations by means of some grants.
- Success stories of Dalit women are required to be diffused by suitable means. Mass media channels need to support for such a noble cause.

### Conclusion

In the state of Andhra Pradesh in India, the last three decades have witnessed earth storming Dalit movements questioning the authority of dominant castes and demanding equality and self respect. Dalit movements across the state and the country questioned all political ideologies for ignoring caste question in the guise of class analysis and thereby brought a clear political divide among all the parties on caste question. This is considered as a historical contribution of Dalit movement. Thus, these movements raised many critical questions of caste and had shaken even the revolutionary parties to come out with their stand on caste. However, the movements remained male dominated though Dalit women were active participants in the movement, they remained invisible and their issues neglected.

Dalit women are thrice oppressed and exploited under the caste, class and gender structures and fall far behind both Dalit men and other women in development indicators. Dalit girls are exploited all-round. It is estimated that a majority of the 15,000 girls trafficked annually are from Dalit communities. There is all-round lack of awareness and apathy towards women's rights and laws. While the ordinary women are ignorant of their rights and laws concerning them due to illiteracy and poverty, it is a stark truth that most of the men are equally ignorant due to lack of concern and gender perspective.

The feminist movements of the last three decades were successful in exposing the gender stereotypes, gender division of labor, discrimination, domestic violence, women's reproductive rights and the problems of the single women in the society. The feminist movement however did not address the problems of Dalit women because it did not concern itself with the caste

question, as most of the feminists themselves came from the dominant caste and class and have inherited class and caste characters.

The patriarchic attitude of the Dalit movement, despite its progressive contribution and the neglect of Dalit women by the feminist movement provided the context for the emergence of organizations like *Dalit Stree Sakthi*. In these circumstances in the course of campaign on violence against women, communication as a wholesome weapon, *Dalit Stree Sakthi* has been emerged as an independent platform to address the Dalit women question so as to facilitate the Dalit women to struggle for their rights and entitlements.

Communication promotes motivation of Dalit Women by informing and clarifying many unattended questions. It is a source of information to the Dalit women for decision-making process as it helps identifying and assessing alternative course of actions. It also plays a crucial role in altering the attitudes of Dalit women i.e. well informed Dalit women will have better attitude than a less-informed Dalit women. Communication in various forms would certainly help in changing the attitudes of Dalit women. It also helps in socializing Dalit women and assists in controlling process. Finally, it helps controlling Dalit women's behavior in various ways. So, it should be an endeavor of every organization like DSS to adapt communication to achieve desired results.

#### Notes

1. Harijan was a term used by Mohandas Gandhi for Dalits. Gandhi said it was wrong to call people "untouchable", and called them Harijans, which means children of God.
2. There are four Vedas: Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. The Vedas are the primary texts of Hinduism. Traditionally the text of the Vedas was coeval with the universe. Scholars have determined that the Rig Veda, the oldest of the four Vedas. The Vedas contain hymns, incantations, and rituals from ancient India.

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