Caste Discrimination in Modern Workspaces: The Case of ActionAid India

Written by Karthik Navayan   Published on 06 January 2014

Karthik Navayan

This paper attempts to highlight the covert caste practices and discriminatory behaviour of the dominant caste personnel in the top hierarchy of ActionAid bureaucracy in its Indian chapter, wherein the dominant caste members from both Northern and Southern India, with a deep sense of so-called ascriptive superiority endowed by the Hindu scriptures and propagated social practices and cultural beliefs, join hands to keep their hegemony intact, while showing 'a dalit employee' his proper place in the social hierarchy. Moreover, this study aims to underline a pattern, the 'modus operandi' of the 'new forms of discrimination' within the confines of ActionAid that involves the systematic usage of bureaucratic and administrative rules, regulations and procedures to give it an air of fairness and credibility.

1. Caste in Modern Times - Omnipresent and Nuanced

The caste system based on chaturvarnya principles of hierarchy has been strengthened in India and has become more rampant/unbridled in modern times.

It has become omnipresent, nuanced, complex and embedded in all modern spaces with modern faces. It is now difficult to identify and fight caste discrimination. The perpetrator can easily hide and justify his act of discrimination as a logical and justifiable incident with all modern means. A readymade sensibility of 'caste blindness' allows a common person to conclude that 'it is not caste discrimination'.

As the editors of 'No Alphabet in Sight' observe, "caste is configured as a form of power, it has structured social relations... it works in a renewed and updated forms in modern context and modern institutes".2

Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai concur with the above observation: "In spite of various attempts to eradicate active caste consciousness in our society, it continues to erupt in most obnoxious ways thus consolidating caste identity. The active and effective presence of this caste consciousness has spread from the confines of the family to the political arena, from the private to the public spaces."3

Citing the post Mandal commission atmosphere in modern institutions like universities and government institutions and private
institutional workspaces, many studies have pointed towards the reconfigured presence of caste in modern institutions that
often plays a vital role in systematic exclusion of the Dalits, Adivasis and, the minorities. This systematic exclusion plays in
the name of merit, efficiency, articulations, logic, communication, and performance. One important aspect of such modern
forms of exclusion is, as N. Sukumar pointed out, "It seems to unite the perpetrators at the same time that it isolates the
victims. While the "excluders" produce exclusion by collectively expropriating public space and refusing to share social
opportunities". The language of this peculiar kind of modernity legitimates the dominant caste based systematic exclusion and
caste discrimination.

The International Non-Governmental Organisations, the government led State welfare initiatives and the progressive
individuals associated with such initiatives see caste as a thing to fight in a distant place and they think that they are all free
from caste, but these articulations of caste and their caste practices have been challenged by social reformers and
revolutionaries in India.

For example, Gandhi identified untouchability as a problem that is totally outside the Hindu Brahmanical cultural system; he
says, "Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not need to know for the satisfaction of my
spiritual hunger". But Ambedkar challenged this position of Gandhi by pointing out that the caste notion is embedded in the
Hindu Brahmanical cultural system. Hence caste as an outside distant thing which you can fight without shedding away your
own cultural biases is an idea which itself reinforces caste hierarchy, and that is why Ambedkar had said that "Caste is a
notion, it is a state of the mind. The destruction of caste does not therefore mean the destruction of a physical barrier. It
means a notional change." Here Ambedkar clearly challenge the Gandhian liberal notion of reformed caste practice without
untouchability and propose a radical break within socio cultural system that produces and reinforces the caste
consciousness.

However, unfortunately the Indian mainstream and its protagonists have accepted the Gandhian model as the model of caste
reform. This model has never challenged caste consciousness but enshrined the values of caste hierarchy in all modern
spaces. As Aloysius points out, "Caste-Varna as retrieved and reset in modernity has not changed its colours in contemporary
India. If at all, its stranglehold on the social polity is expanding as well as tightening. Ascriptive hierarchy, as the basis of
social status as well as the method of surplus distribution within society is firmer than ever".

National secular institutions and liberal caste reformers follow the same paradigm without challenging caste consciousness;
this often helps them to hide their caste markers. Dominant/aggressive caste (I will be using the terms 'aggressive castes' for
the so-called upper castes and 'defensive castes' for the so-called lower castes) individuals in modern spaces act as
unmarked citizens while they locate caste in pre-modern, distant village spaces. So often, they try to point out this distant
caste and wage a rhetorical war against caste, but at the same time, they maintain their own caste privileges, associations
and practices. This is legitimising their deliberate caste practices and discrimination in modern times.

The dangerous aspect of this paradigm is that this modern unmarked covert/sanitised (caste) bodies often objectify the
people coming from marginal communities into such spaces and mark them as casteist. Sometimes they use their experiences
with this marked/stigmatize/problematic bodies to prove their progressive modern nature, they will claim that they too share
the lived experience of the latter. Meanwhile, in modern spaces they themselves build their own caste interest formations by
using the modern language of 'professionalism' and through caste based practices.

The liberal caste frame never challenges the casteist consciousness of modern minds. As A.S Ajith Kumar points out "placing
caste in the past or in 'not-yet modern' villages doesn't disturb the modern caste mindset. No one, not even a hard-core
casteist would mind admitting that there was caste in the past. The progressive liberals would be comfortable with this
position. It is when we speak about the modern caste practices that the progressive liberals get disturbed because this
places the progressive liberals within the sphere we are talking about caste".

This situation is a challenge for the people who work for human rights, equality and social justice. Unlike others, they are
ready to unpack the modern forms of caste discrimination and caste hierarchical power relations objectively, as the
progressive liberals will never understand the problem and complexity of any incident of caste discrimination.

There are very few sincere people who actually want to understand the reality of caste discrimination, but many people
actually don't want to understand the issue at all and take sides from the beginning with whatever rationality exists in their
mind. This kind of people comprise the great majority in our society. However, the tendency of taking sides without knowing
facts is not limited to the people of any particular caste, ideology, or field - it is all pervasive and probably springs out of
indifference or lack of intention to fight against the evil of caste. The Indian mainstream is characterised by this phenomenon
that advocates the status quo of caste rationality.

However, the irony is that the people who claiming to be change makers, working for human rights, empowerment, social
justice etc of the marginalised people, practice the same modern caste rationality that is contrary to the basic principles of
human rights and social justice. It is difficult to fight individuals with this mindset. They are theatrically progressive, pro-dalits
and pro-poor but covertly casteist. They follow the Gandhian paradigm of caste reform, while maintaining their caste
hegemony in new forms.
2. Caste Neutrality – Communication gaps, Technicalities and Merit Arguments

Neutrality in general does not exist. A fact is not independent, it is fully loaded with value, and value is also a fact. Whatever people consider as a fact, they add their values to it.

An aggressive/upper caste man will never accept the fact that he discriminated against a person of a lower caste status. The perpetrator legitimises his position and tries to avoid his responsibility for the act of discrimination, saying that, he just followed the process (laid out) and that resulted in discrimination. Or he says, the act of discrimination was ‘not intentional’ or that it is a result of a misunderstanding or a communication gap.

Alternatively, he will get into other debates of technicalities instead of answering the questions asked of him, and drag on the matter until the victim gets annoyed. The perpetrators also try to mobilise people on false propaganda against the victim, go to any extent, spreading lies and blaming the victim instead of accepting the truth.

What is missing here is the fact that the modern institutional space and structure itself has been constituted for the upper/aggressive caste by the upper/aggressive caste. This atmosphere often alienates and discourages people from marginalised communities, so the language and understanding of these institutions themselves act as instruments of exclusion and sometimes, humiliation.

This happens in all state operated institutions, private institutions, including the development sector, the NGO sector, which claim to be working for the marginalised people and their empowerment. This article /paper discusses one such case of caste based discrimination and suppression of an employee who belongs to socially excluded community. Interestingly it took place in a development institution, none other than ActionAid India, an anti-poverty agency working in India since 1972 with the chronically poor and socially excluded communities ‘to end poverty and injustice together’.

3. The case of ActionAid

This is the case study of ActionAid India, an organisation that claims to be an anti-poverty agency, it is working in India since 1972 and claims that ‘it is working with the poor people to end poverty and injustice’. The country director of ActionAid India is Sandeep Chachra; he belongs to a dominant caste from Punjab and claims that he is a social anthropologist by training, and a development activist. He also claims that he has lived and worked with indigenous people and Dalit communities in India.

Sehjo Singh is ActionAid India’s Programme Director, Dipali Sharma is Director of Organisational Effectiveness/Human Resoures and Vijay Naugain is the Senior Manager, Organisational Effectiveness /HR.

The Regional Manager of ActionAid Hyderabad is Raghu Pilla, who belongs to the Kapu community, an aggressive forward caste from coastal Andhra. The Programme Manager is Nandamuri Indira Rani who belongs to the Kamma community, another aggressive forward caste from the coastal Andhra region.

All the heads of the country office and Hyderabad office belong to upper /aggressive castes within the Brahmanical paradigm. They are from privileged social locations, and they claim to be progressive, pro-Dalit, pro-Adivasi, pro-Muslim and pro-poor change makers.

4. The advertisement, interview, offer, downgrading and appointment

Now coming to the specific case of caste discrimination in ActionAid: in 2012, there were two separate advertisements for two Programme Officer positions in ActionAid, Hyderabad Region. The first advertisement appeared indevnetjobsindia.org portal in January 2012, and the last date for receiving applications was 20th January. The second advertisement was circulated in everyone.india group mail on 2nd February 2012. The last date for receiving applications for this post was 10th February 2012.

I had applied in response to the first advertisement for the position of Programme Officer. I was short-listed, interviewed by the panel consisting of Raghu Pilla (Regional Manager), Dr Sagari Ramdas (seems to be an old partner of ActionAid) and Ruchi Pathak from HR-New Delhi.

Yarlagadda Jai Bharath was selected for one Programme Officer’s position; he belongs to the Kamma community, from coastal Andhra. I was selected for the other Programme Officer’s position. I belong to a Dalit community from Telangana region.

Yarlagadda Jai Bharath was appointed as Programme Officer but I was appointed as Field Officer with the same job description as a Programme Officer’s. There was no difference in the job descriptions of the two jobs (the Field Officer’s job offered to me finally and the Programme Officer’s position for which I was actually interviewed and selected), except for the salary specifications.
After my interview for the post of Programme Officer on March 23rd 2012, I was expecting a call from HR, but surprisingly it was Raghu, the regional manager himself, who contacted me on 13th April 2012, to inform that I was selected for the advertised position. However, he said that the "interview panel felt that my previous experience was not sufficient enough for handling partners, therefore I need to work as a Field Officer". In reply, I told him that I have experience of managing partners in Save the Children, and National Dalit Forum, where I worked previously. But he told me that it was the interview panel's decision to downgrade the Programme Officer position to Field Officer position.

Then I asked him whether there "is any possibility for upgradation of the position", and he replied, "Yes, ActionAid is a very good place for people like you, you will enjoy working here, and you will grow here".

April 2012.

I believed the same, and joined as Field Officer on April 16th 2012, accepting the downgraded position, and signed the contract as per the appointment letter. And hoped that the position would be upgraded after I demonstrated my competencies.

**No Offer Letter.** What surprised me was that the formal HR process of sending the 'written offer letter' was not followed in my case; the HR sent me the appointment letter directly. If they had sent the formal written offer letter, I would have written back to them saying that I accepted the downgraded position, on promise of possibility for upgradation only. But the offer was made in a telephone conversation between Raghu and me. *Why was there no written offer letter? Why did Raghu, instead of HR, contact me?*

Colleagues from other regions were of the impression that I was appointed as Programme Officer. Every colleague from other regions whom I met was surprised to know that I was only a Field Officer but was attending all workshops, meetings and duties like any other Programme Officer. Even the HR Newsletter of ActionAid- Issue 2- 2012, mentioned me as a Programme Officer. I strongly feel that branding me as a candidate not suitable for the position of Programme Officer was a decision of prejudice because I am a Dalit.

According to the advertisement, the Programme Officer position needed 3 years experience but I have 8 years of experience in the NGO sector. And saying that I do not have experience in partnership management was also wrong: I had worked with another INGO, Save The Children, and in a national level NGO, National Dalit Forum and I had experience in partnership management. Even in ActionAid, I was handling a long-term partner LRP (Local Rights Programme) since my appointment, I was also handling three NF (short term partners) – where eight people were working - and I was focal person for the ‘democratisation hub’ and ‘peace and justice hub’. Moreover, all these functions fit the job of Programme Officer, which was advertised. I had been doing a Programme Officer's job with a Field Officer's salary. This is what I am calling caste discrimination.

If this is not caste discrimination, what is it? This is clearly caste discrimination. Caste discrimination inherently operates as a natural process, serving only as occasional pricks to the conscience of the 'civilized, educated' perpetrator, but it will become visible and be understood only if we look at it from the victim's point of view because only he bears the scars from the humiliation.

Interestingly, the Bangalore regional office of the same ActionAid, short-listed and interviewed me for the position of 'Programme Manager' on 8th April 2011. This is a higher position than that of Programme Officer. When a person is qualified enough to be shortlisted for a higher position in the same organisation, can't he be suitable for a lesser position in the same organisation? Is it not denial of equal opportunity and fair play?

5. Efforts for upgradation

I put all my efforts to get upgradation as programme officer between June-July 2012. **Vijay Naugain, HR Manager, also shared the person power analysis** with all regions as ActionAid Procedure. That report mentioned that in AP Region one"FO already recruited and in future this position is to be upgraded to Programme Officer".

I spoke to Raghu and requested him for the upgradation of my position to Programme Officer as he had promised at the time of my appointment, and as proposed by the HR Manager in his ‘person power analysis’ (review of manpower requirements). He said that he would pursue it after completion of my probation in October, 2012.

September 2012.

In addition, **I wrote a personal mail to Raghu**, requesting upgradation of the position at the time of completion of my probation. There was no response to this mail from Raghu.
own earlier statements. Raghu first said that the downgrading the Programme Officer's position to one of Field Officer was the 'interview panel's decision', then he changed it to the 'region's decision' when Sehjo Singh (Director, Programmes) asked him in a video conference (in May 2012). Raghu mentioned in the VC that another PO position was needed in AP region. Sehjo asked immediately, "Why did you ask for Field Officer, while recruiting Karthik?" Rajasekhar, Programme Officer in Hyderabad region, and I were also participating in the video conference along with Raghu.

[Later, when I interacted with other colleagues about whether they knew that I was recruited as Field Officer, none of them seemed aware of this change from Programme Officer to Field Officer. Moreover, in the recent second Programme Policy Workshop in August 2013, in the debate after the Koodam 6 (internal democracy) presentation, Raghu said that all the decisions regarding recruitment 'are taken by HR, regional managers do not have any role'. I was surprised: downgrading a programme officer's position to a field officer's position was whose decision then? Was it the decision of the Interview Panel or the Regional Manager or HR? Or it was only Raghu's decision? Which one of the above reasons is correct?]

October – November 2012.

At the time of completion of my probation and confirmation, all colleagues wrote to our country office requesting upgradation of my position. While giving feedback on my performance Indira, Vara Prasad, Rajasekhar, Bharath and Kalpana - with whom I had been working in the Hyderabad Region - wrote to the country office with the request to upgrade my position to programme officer. Since then Raghu started saying that there is no provision for upgradation according to HR policy.

My concern is that if there is no provision for upgradation of a position, if the rules are so rigid, how did HR allow the interview panel to downgrade a position? What is the role of HR? What about the decision-making system and processes in the organisation? What are the checks and balances in the system to prevent autocracy, victimisation or nepotism etc?

But ignoring the repeated requests from me and my colleagues, my position was not upgraded but confirmed as Field Officer by HR. Vijay Naugain (HR Manager) had sent a mail on 8th November 2012:

January 2013.

In January 2013, I offered my resignation because of lack of support and appreciation in the organization. On that occasion, Raghu called me into his room and said that - ActionAid’s budget had been reduced, so there was a shortage of funds and therefore I was not offered the Programme Officer's position when I was recruited.

Around the same time, while contemplating resigning from my position of Field Officer on 21st January 2013, I wrote a mail to Sandeep (India – Country Director) and senior management team on 26th January 2013 explaining the discrimination that I was facing in the ActionAid Hyderabad region.

Sandeep responded immediately to my mail, taking a very technical stand, and asked HR to look into the matter. But HR did not enquire into the matter then, except for speaking to me a couple of times over phone.

March-June 2013.

When I offered to resign, Raghu had said that 'a Programme Officer's position will be advertised soon, you may apply and get in as a fresh candidate'. Again, I believed him and took back my resignation, but he planned not to select me in the interview on May 8th, 2013. Vijay Naugain in his mail on 11th June 2013 wrote to me that Raghu and Indira had barred themselves from marking me in the interview. Why so? What were Raghu's earlier statements and his sincerity towards his own words? Why did Raghu and Indira refuse to give marks to me? If they did not want to give marks, why were they in the interview panel? What was their rationale? What is their integrity?

With regard to my job responsibilities, I was looking after one LRP and 3 NF partners. In addition, I was the focal person for the Democratisation Knowledge Activist Hub and Peace and Justice Knowledge Activist Hub but my mail id was not included in the PO – India email group, and I used to miss many important communications related to LRP statutory requirements. Therefore, I requested Raghu to include my mail id in the PO-India email group, My mail was included and I started receiving mails; however I continued as a Field Officer.

Though I was there as a programme person with proven abilities to be a Programme Officer, instead of upgrading my position, a fresh notification was issued to recruit a Programme Officer. The HR again advertised the Programme Officer position on 26th March 2013. I applied and was short-listed and attended the interview for the 2nd time for the same position of Programme Officer in the same organisation and the same region. Raghu invited Sagari Ramdas, for the second time, as an interview panel member for the selection of Programme Officer. She was a panel member during my first interview too.

When Raghu called me to his chamber after my resignation in January 2013, and said that it was the panel's decision (downgrading the Programme Officer's position), I told him that the entire panel consisting of Sagari Ramdas, Raghu and Ruchi is biased. Even after my complaint against the decision of the interview panel - why had Raghu invited the same Sagari Ramdas to be in the panel for the second interview? Raghu and Sagari Ramdas were accused of downgrading the advertised
Programme Officer's position by violating all procedures and norms, but they sat in the interview panel for the second time too. **How can the accused sit in the position of a judge?**

As I suspected, Raghu, and Indira barred themselves from giving marks to me in the interview. Raghu and Indira actually conspired to send me out of the organisation because I was questioning the injustice done to me there by exposing their authoritarianism in the organisation. **How can they discriminate against my candidature by not giving marks based on my performance?**

If they did not want to judge me, being colleagues, they should have avoided taking part in the panel and constituted a panel with the type of persons who could be more objective. If they decided not to give marks to me, but to give marks to the other candidates, it should be seen as a strategy to put me aside dictatorially, even after I had worked there doing a Programme Officer's job (but in a lower position and salary) for a year and was appreciated by many colleagues, both from within and outside the region.

As per the contract with ActionAid, my period ended on 15th May 2013. However, there was no communication from HR whether I was to continue in the same position or not. When I met Raghu on 16th May 2013, he told me to continue in the same position until further information from HR.

The most agonising part was that my official mail ID had been hacked (in February 2013) and some important mails written by me in this context were deleted. My password was also changed; **I approached the IT Unit for help, and Vipin Yadav from IT unit helped me to regain access to my official mail**33. By this time, I had sufficient reasons to believe that Raghu was trying his best to victimise me.

Explaining all these circumstances, **I wrote a mail to Sandeep on 18th May 2013**34. Sandeep **replied on 20th May 2013 and forwarded it to HR to look into the matter**35.

Vijay Naugain **also replied saying that he will look into the matter soon** on 23rd May 201336. Since then there was no communication from HR, so **I wrote another mail on 28th May 2013 to Sandeep and Vijay Naugain** requesting them to uphold the values of equality and social justice and to upgrade my position to Programme Officer as advertised in 201237. In that letter, I raised 11 points defending my position for Programme Officer.

On 11th June 2013, **I received a response from Vijay Naugain for my May 28th 2013 letter**38. In this letter, Vijay wrote that there was only one vacancy in Hyderabad region in 2012, and I was given a chance on the recommendation of the interview panel, even though there was no vacancy.

This was completely wrong. **I wrote back immediately on 12th June 2012**39, saying that there were two advertisements for two Programme Officers separately in 2012, and then **I gathered the documentary evidence of the two advertisements for two Programme Officers in ActionAid Hyderabad in 2012**40.

I sent both the advertisements along with my interview call letter to Vijay Naugain and Sandeep on 19th June 2013 and **I received a reply on 24th June 2013**41. In this mail, Vijay wrote that I was interviewed for the position of Programme Officer but was found not suitable. This contradicted his earlier response.

I found that the HR tried its best to justify the injustice done to me, and to protect Raghu. No one looked into the issue and conducted a proper inquiry objectively. **I wrote back the same to Vijay and Sandeep** on 25th June 201342.

In my view, it was a gross violation of the value of equality, which ActionAid claims to uphold. ActionAid announces to all human rights organisations and the state that it is an upholder of social justice. Ironically, when it comes to practice it does not follow what it preaches; it demonstrates prejudice and unfair judgemental attitude towards the marginalised sections and their competencies.

As the HR and Management ActionAid India was not responding to my appeals I forwarded the same letter (on 26th June 2013) **to the ActionAid international board, India country Director and All ActionAid staff of India**, explaining all the above issues and demanding a comprehensive inquiry43.

After reading this letter, **thirty colleagues in ActionAid India responded and wrote to Sandeep Chachra, Country Director, supporting me and demanding inquiry into the allegations levelled in my letter**44. Vijay Naugain wrote a reply mail acknowledging all the communications45.

Raghu and Indira continued in their roles as Regional Manager and Programme Manager while facing all these allegations. However, the established legal norms say that if any person in a decisive position faces allegations, the enquiry should not be conducted while that person continues in the same position as he or she or whoever is in that position will influence the enquiry process by influencing his subordinates, who know the facts of the case, by using his/her official position. And that is
what happened in this case too. ActionAid management should have transferred them or at least asked them to go on leave.

After seeing all this, I was compelled to look at what was ActionAid’s affirmative policy towards the marginalised communities. In every advertisement ActionAid mentions that people from SC, ST, BC and Minority communities are encouraged to apply, but does that really matter when recruitments take place?

One thing I would like to mention here is that I am not at all looking at this issue as my individual problem and I am not fighting for any personal benefit. I see this whole issue as the suffering of a Dalit who comes from Telangana and as a rights activist. I wish that this should not have happened in ActionAid at least, as I have deep respect towards the values and objectives which ActionAid claims to uphold.

6. The process of Inquiry

I demanded an enquiry on 26th June 2013 and many colleagues in ActionAid supported my demand. After repeated requests, the HR constituted a committee consisting of the following members: Mr. Martin Macwan46, Dalit rights activist based in Gujarat, Ms Kumkum Kumar47, Programme Manager-ActionAid India, Kolkata Regional Office and Mr. Samarendra Behera48, Functional Manager-Finance, Country Office, ActionAid India.

September 2013.

On 5 September 2013, I had sent a mail to all the enquiry committee members explaining the grievances49. The committee visited Hyderabad and conducted the enquiry on 12 September 2013. But out of three members, Kumkum Kumar was absent due to personal reasons, and only Martin Macwan and Samarendra Behera participated in the inquiry. Vijay Naugain, HR senior Manager, facilitated this enquiry.

The entire enquiry process was audio recorded. However, frankly speaking, instead of conducting an enquiry, they interrogated me. Vijay Naugain was supposed to facilitate the enquiry process, but he sat along with the committee and started arguing with me instead of facilitating. Surprisingly the enquiry committee too entertained his involvement without discouraging even once. Except for Martin Macwan, Samarendra Behera and Vijay Naugain kept on talking irrelevant issues and not listening to the issues I raised. This was further victimisation. This can be observed by listening to the audio recording, if it has not been edited.

I had asked the enquiry committee to go through my written submission which I had sent to them on 5th September 2013, but they asked me to explain orally. I started explaining from the beginning, but Vijay Naugain intervened many times, saying ‘let me correct you’ ‘let me correct you’ and recorded his concocted version of the story.

While I was saying that my position was downgraded after interview, Martin Macwan asked me ‘why are you always saying downgraded? I told him that I was interviewed for the position of Programme Officer and was appointed as Field Officer. It indicates that Martin Macwan may not have read my written submission which I had sent him on 5th September, 2013, thinking that he will read it before coming. Vijay Naugain and Ragu Pilla may have informed him of their false arguments saying that I was given an opportunity even though there was no vacancy.

As per the principles of human rights, any enquiry on the allegations of discrimination should be conducted from the victim’s point of view and not from the point of view of someone who is accused of discrimination. The committee had totally ignored this principle. Any enquiry should be conducted by involving all stakeholders - apart from interacting with the both petitioner and respondents separately, the committee should also interact with the witnesses, and people who know the facts. But this committee interacted only with me and the respondents Ragu, Indira and Sagari Ramdas. The committee should at least have interacted with the Hyderabad regional staff who know the facts.

At the end of enquiry, Martin Macwan said ‘Karthik, this is not caste discrimination, depart with smile’. Without even bothering to think on the issues that I had put before them, Martin Macwan asked me to leave ActionAid with a smile. He even asked me ‘what is your next plan?’ This attitude indicates the pre-planned conclusions of the enquiry committee; the committee had come for formality’s sake and to justify all the allegations.

I asked Vijay Naugain, whether downgrading an advertised position while appointing is ok with ActionAid’s HR policy? He said that, ‘yes, it is OK’. But he did not give any reference to the provision which allows downgrading an advertised position and he also did not mention which particular provision of the HR policy prevents the upgradation of the downgraded position? So according to ActionAid HR policy, only downgrading is possible but upgradation is not possible. And they preach all democratic principles to the outside world!

ActionAid management had chosen two Dalits, Martin Macwan and Samarendra Behera who were ready to protect their interests against another Dalit victim; this follows the age-old practice of caste politics of dominant/ aggressive castes against the defensive marginalised castes. They create differences and enmity among Dalits by using their resources.

7. The legitimacy of the enquiry committee Report

https://mail.google.com/mail/?ui=2&ik=69ff289da4&view=pt&q=Irene.Actionaid%40gmail.com&qs=true&search=query&msg=1436db50f73b7f48
On 25th October, Dipali Sharma was appointed as ActionAid Director of organisational effectiveness, and on the same day Vijay Naugain sent me a mail mentioning the bits and pieces of the enquiry committee report instead of sending the entire report. I wrote back asking him to send the full report on 26th October 2013.

On 29th October 2013, Vijay Naugain wrote a mail with an attachment of the full report of the enquiry committee at 2:50 pm. Immediately after sending this report, he wrote another mail at 3:43 pm closing my contract with ActionAid by 31st October, 2013, without even hearing my view on the enquiry committee report.

On 30th October, 2013, I wrote to Vijay Naugain seeking some clarifications on the genuineness of this enquiry committee report. As per Vijay Naugain’s mail dated 04 September, 2013, Martin Macwan and Samarendra Behera, after investigation/enquiry, were supposed to have shared their notes/findings with Kumkum Kumar and taken her approval on the findings and finalised the report.

However, the report presented to the AA management and the one sent to me (in PDF version) contains only two names, Martin Macwan and Samarendra Behera. Therefore, I requested him to present me the endorsement of the report by Kumkum Kumar.

Vijay Naugain mentioned that the ActionAid management accepted the report: so I requested him to send me a copy of the minutes of the management meeting that had accepted the report.

Further, I requested him to provide the advice (and any suggestions or advise to deal with this case) of the management committee to HROD to follow up on the findings of the report. There was no reply offering proof of the genuineness of the enquiry committee report, but on the evening of 31st October, 2013, they deactivated my official mail id Karthik.navayan@actionaid.org. Moreover, on 4th November, 2013, after handing over the projects, documents, office gadgets and equipments, they blocked my personal mail id Navayan@gmail.com from sending mails to ActionAid server mail ids.

8. The Contradictions in the Enquiry Committee Report

The content of the enquiry committee report does not speak about all the issues which I raised in my written submission to the committee. The issues I raised were:

1. As per the advertisement I was interviewed for the job of Programme Officer. However, while recruiting I was appointed as Field Officer with duties and responsibilities of a Programme Officer, but the enquiry committee did not look into the job description advertised and the one offered to me with lower salary. This is the crux of the whole case.

2. When I asked for upgradation from the downgraded position, Raghu had said that there is no provision of upgradation. Now the question arises: if there was no provision in the HR policy for upgradation of any position, how can there be a provision for downgrading one position? The committee did not discuss anything about this pertinent question.

3. The committee in its first finding says, Raghu recommended promotion of Ms Lavanya, but did not do the same in the case of Mr Navayan. I never wrote about this in any of my mail communications; I am surprised to hear about it from the enquiry committee. Who gave them this information? The fact is that, when Vijay Naugain shared the ‘person power analysis’, I requested Raghu to propose my upgradation to the country office. But in the staff meeting, Raghu asked all members of staff, ‘could we propose upgradation for Ms. Lavanya?’ Immediately I asked him, if we propose upgradation for Lavanya, my upgradation may not be considered. He replied saying, Lavanya is project staff so her upgradation is different from my upgradation. I kept quiet after hearing this. But the truth is that he proposed upgradation for Lavanya, though it did not happen.

4. The second finding of the committee is about the incident where Indira asked me to get down from the vehicle in Afzalgunj while we were returning from field work. According to the information I received from the driver Janareddy, Indira went to Begumpet for shopping, so she asked me to get down midway. I expected the enquiry committee to call the driver to enquire about the facts, but Martin Macwan hesitated to call the driver. Moreover, Indira said that she did not go for shopping, but to an office meeting. I agreed that if that is the case, I should have been informed of the same in advance. And being a non-Hyderabadi, Indira does not know the correct routes. Travelling to Karkhana via Begumpet is the longer route; the shorter way goes via Vidyanagar, Tarnaka and Secunderabad to Karkhana. The committee should have called driver Janareddy and asked him about these facts.

5. Regarding the third finding of the committee, I can still say that Indira’s fifth feedback on the document which I prepared was invalid, unsolicited. The committee should have examined the document, but they were in a hurry to complete the entire enquiry to close it there and then itself.

6. The fourth finding of the committee is about the incident where Raghu asked me to switch off the AC while I was working. Mr. Raghu said that he was always conscious about saving energy and therefore he had asked Mr. Navayan to move to the other workstation. If saving energy is the reason, why did Raghu not ask Rajasekhar and Bharath, who were sitting in two
different rooms, with ACs on? Rajasekhar's room was opposite Raghu's room. Raghu passed both Rajasekhar's and Bharath's rooms, where they were both working with ACs on, but he asked only me to switch off the AC. But the inquiry committee was convinced with Raghu's energy saving theory.

7. The fifth finding of the committee is about Sagari Ramdas who was a member of the interview panels for the two interviews which I had attended. She was a party to the decision of downgrading Programme Officer's position. And in the second interview, she had found me not suitable for the position of Programme Officer. The report quoted her: "She remembered the details. She said that she had known about the human rights work of Mr. Navayan and therefore had respect for him. However, in the interview the panel has to look into many factors to finally compile the merit list. The exercise is not always that easy. She remembered that during the first interview Mr. Navayan was found to have potential but unfortunately during the second interview though with his experience he was expected to perform better, he did not come up to the level expected. " As she said in the interview that there maybe many factors (to be considered) – but what are they? Why didn't she disclose those factors? Why are they confidential? And how could I have had shown potential in the first interview but was found to have 'not performed as expected' in the second interview? Actually, I had performed very well in the second interview. After working in ActionAid for 1 year, knowing all procedures, I had answered all the questions asked by Sagari Ramdas. But the enquiry committee found Sagari Ramdas very frank and open.

8. The sixth finding of the committee says Raghu never promised upgradation, but as I had already explained earlier, this was in a telephone conversation between Raghu and me. The offer was made in the phone call instead of in a written mail communication.

The committee went on to say that there was no caste discrimination in its remark two, but it did not explain how it was not caste discrimination. And the committee not writing a single word on the downgrading of the position amounts to what? Was it procedural error or discrimination -- what was it? Making people feel low, treating them low and downgrading is the ideology of caste. Caste means the absence of reason and morality, those two values were found lacking in the organization. The committee should have looked into this seriously.

9. The committee in its remark three, says 'Raghu was hurt by (my) allegation that I did not trust him'. This is a complete misinterpretation of the conversation. Martin Macwan had asked me whether I trust Raghu. In reply I said "it depends" then he insisted that I give a 'yes or no' reply. Even then I had said "sometimes Raghu is cooperative, but in some instances I will not trust him". Then Martin Macwan had again pressured me to say 'yes or no only'; then I told him that I do not trust Raghu. This conversation was audio recorded, it can be heard again if it has not been edited.

10. The remark 4 is not really relevant in any sense, I had followed the procedure of the HR. After appointment I approached Raghu for my upgradation, then I approached Vijay Naugain and Sehjo Singh, then I also wrote a mail to Raghu, nothing moved. Then I wrote a mail to Sandeep and the senior management team on 26th January 2013. Even then, nothing moved. Then I wrote to the board and Chair, International Board of ActionAid, and India Country Director and All ActionAid staff. My last mail in this regard was my submission to the enquiry committee, Where had I behaved inappropriately in this entire episode?

11. If I were given programme officer position as advertised, and for which I was interviewed, I would not have to attend another interview for the same position. Those who were appointed as programme officers on contractual basis in other regions like Chennai, Patna, and Bhubaneswar were regularised without further interviews. Why did only I have to sit for another round of interviews and found not suitable for the programme officer position even though I had worked for one year with the same job description as a programme officer? The enquiry committee never looked into this issue.

12. The enquiry committee came with a clear motive to justify all the decisions of Raghu and the ActionAid management. The report follows the same lines and does not speak anything in the real sense.

13. I am a human rights activist, I studied masters in law, was also a practicing lawyer, and I know and articulate in English. If I had to face this kind of discrimination in an organisation which claims to be working for justice and democracy what is the status of other rural Dalits who do not have the language skills and articulation?

9. Internal democracy in ActionAid

My case is not the only one in ActionAid. There were many cases where Dalits and other staff were suppressed, ignored and discriminated.

To understand the undemocratic practices and violations of prescribed procedures in ActionAid India, please refer to the Document presented in the second Programme Policy Workshop (ActionAid Internal workshop) of ActionAid India on internal democracy . It was prepared by a team of ActionAid staff and presented by Regional Manager of ActionAid Bangalore, Kshithij Urs, in Hyderabad on 4th August 2013. The team proposed to dismantle the existing structure of Senior Management Team, which is the highest decision making body in ActionAid India and consists of all Regional Managers.

It says, "ActionAid must promote leadership collectives, instead of a single leader at all levels of the organisation. A new instrument of governance must be drafted that sets out the powers of each of these structures and they should operate as
a collective. This means that there must be continuous and ongoing consultations on matters affecting ActionAid. In addition, it means that all members must take responsibility to explain and ensure the implementation of decisions taken by these collectives. Collective leadership also means that leadership skills, experience, responsibilities and knowledge must be shared. As a consequence, the senior management team should be dismantled and its powers and responsibilities be devolved to collective leadership groups.

This document was appreciated by the majority of the staff of ActionAid. However, the people sitting in the management positions have become uncomfortable with this document and started protecting themselves by opposing it.

10. Conclusion - Commodification of Human Rights and Violation of Democratic Rights

Within our nation state, we have at least some constitutional measures to claim our rights and security; we have achieved them through painful struggles and mobilization.

However, agencies like ActionAid India, securing benefits in the name of Dalits and Adivasis, are delegitimizing the valid claims of the very same Dalits and Adivasis in their institutional space while talking about their neutrality and meritocracy. Certainly, there were many good people in ActionAid India, but the management and ideology of ActionAid is casteist in nature and anti-Dalit, anti-Adivasi and anti-minorities.

Caste plays a crucial role in the life of any individual in India. The caste system of hierarchy is embedded in the minds of people, and has been brought back into the modern national life of India through all modern means. The change agents like ActionAid also subscribe to the same Gandhian liberal caste framework in their operations and strategies. Moreover, they maintain the caste hierarchy within their system and fight against untouchability in some distant place. This is often done by carrying out discrimination on Dalits, Adivasi and minorities.

Now caste is an accepted form of hierarchy and social power, which is naturalized in India’s social psyche. So, caste is still the only criterion on the basis of which Indians judge and are judged in modern days too.

Caste has gone nowhere; it has to be challenged in its conscious level in modern forms. However, ActionAid propagates the idea that the problem with caste is only untouchability. ActionAid India’s country strategy paper –IV- 2011-2016 itself says, “No untouchability will be practiced in the villages in our work zone”.

ActionAid maintains a strategic silence towards modern institutional forms of caste and its social, cultural and political power; this silence legitimises their own caste practises and discrimination towards marginalised communities. Therefore, their rhetoric of "change" means maintaining the caste status quo and dismissing the radical attempt to annihilate caste and its modern varieties.

Cartoon by Dr. Sylvia Karpagam, originally published on her blog; reproduced with permission.

Notes/References

[1]. The general proposition that the social organization of the Indo-Aryans was based on the theory of Chaturvarnya and that Chaturvarnya means division of society into four classes— Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers),Vaishyas (traders) and Shudras (menials).


[3]. Available at http://barefootphilosophers.wordpress.com/tag/gopal-guru/

[4]. The Mandal Commission was established in India in 1979 by the Janata Party government under Prime Minister Morarji Desai with a mandate to "identify the socially or educationally backward". It was headed by Indian parliamentarian B.P. Mandal to consider the question of reservations and quotas in government jobs and educational institutions for the classes so identified to redress caste discrimination.


[10]. ActionAid website available at [http://www.actionaid.org/india/who-we-are-1](http://www.actionaid.org/india/who-we-are-1)

[11]. Sandeep Chachra is Executive Director, ActionAid India [Sandeep.chachra@actionaid.org](mailto:Sandeep.chachra@actionaid.org)


[13]. Sehjo Singh is the Director of Programmes for ActionAid India - [Sehjo.singh@actionaid.org](mailto:Sehjo.singh@actionaid.org)[14].

[14]. Dipali Sharma is the Director of Organizational Effectiveness/HR for ActionAid India - [Dipali.sharma@actionaid.org](mailto:Dipali.sharma@actionaid.org)

[15]. Vijay Naugain is the Senior Manager Organizational Effectiveness/HR - [Vijay.naugain@actionaid.org](mailto:Vijay.naugain@actionaid.org)

[16]. Raghu Pilla is Regional Manager of ActionAid India for Hyderabad region - [Raghu.p@actionaid.org](mailto:Raghu.p@actionaid.org)

[17]. Nandamuri Indira Rani is Programme Manager of ActionAid India for Hyderabad Region - [indira.rani@actionaid.org](mailto:indira.rani@actionaid.org)


[20]. Sagar R Ramdas Co-Director of ANTHRA (sagari.ramdas@gmail.com)

[21]. Ruchi Pathak is a HR Manager in ActionAid India - [Ruchi.Pathak@actionaid.org](mailto:Ruchi.Pathak@actionaid.org)


[23]. Available at [http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/?attachment_id=867](http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/?attachment_id=867)


[35]. Available at [http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/?attachment_id=852](http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/?attachment_id=852)


[44]. Available at http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/30-actionaid-staff-wrote-to-country-director-in-support-of-me.pdf


[46]. Martin Macwan, Enquiry Committee Member - martin.macwan@gmail.com

[47]. Kumkum Kumar Enquiry Committee Member - Kumkum.kumar@actionaid.org

[48]. Samarendra Behera, Enquiry Committee Member - Samarendra.behera@actionaid.org

[49]. Available at http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/2013/09/my-submission-to-enquiry-committee.pdf


[51]. Available at http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/re-re-outcome-of-the-inquiry-proceedings-held-on-12th-september-2013.pdf

[52]. Available at http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/re-re-outcome-of-the-inquiry-proceedings-held-on-12th-september-20131.pdf


[57]. Available at http://karthiknavayan.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/democratisation-document.pdf P.8


~~~

Karthik Navayan is a human rights activist.
B. Karthik Navayan,