

# Experiences and Perceptions of Discrimination among Dalits and Muslims

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Through the use of new survey data, the experiences and perceptions of discrimination among Dalits and Muslims have been quantified. One important result is that many respondents report experiencing discrimination at school and in interactions with government officials. These results are even more worrisome when we consider that self-reports of discrimination perhaps underestimate the true extent of the problem.

In a recent study, we introduced Social Attitudes Research, India (SARI), a mobile phone survey about prejudice, discrimination, and social attitudes, and presented findings about explicit prejudices held by people from advantaged groups about Dalits and women (Coffey et al 2018). The present study shifts the focus from quantifying prejudices voiced by people from dominant groups to quantifying experiences and perceptions of discrimination among people from disadvantaged groups; in particular, Dalits and Muslims. Few prior studies report Dalits' and Muslims' own experiences and perceptions of discrimination using quantitative survey data; the unique data reported in this article contribute to a more complete picture of the nature and extent of discrimination in India.

Why is it important to quantify experiences and perceptions of discrimination? Such experiences bring pain, distress, humiliation, and discouragement (Jadhav et al 2016; Guru 2009; Sukumar 2008). There is mounting evidence that experiencing discrimination impacts mental and physical health (Paradies 2006). Experiences of discrimination are particularly significant when they occur in schools and during interactions with government officials, as these institutions are supposed to provide equal treatment and create equal opportunities. Although perceiving that one's group faces discrimination may seem less problematic than actually experiencing it, research suggests that perceiving that one's group faces discrimination has harmful effects on psychological well-being (Schmitt et al 2014).

It is important to note, however, that obtaining accurate estimates of the extent of discrimination through self-reports

is not a straightforward exercise. We experiment with different ways of asking Dalit and Muslim respondents to report discrimination in an effort to better understand the measurement challenges posed by these sorts of survey questions. Although our estimates of personal experiences of discrimination—including during interactions with government officials—are worryingly high, there are several reasons to believe that they are underestimates of the true extent of the problem. We hope that our findings will encourage other researchers to build on these initial attempts and experiment with new questions or with groups of respondents.

## Quantifying Discrimination

Much of what we know about experiences of discrimination in India comes from personal accounts or village studies (Bama 1992; Valmiki 2003; Shah et al 2006). These are important in describing the pain, anxiety, and sadness faced by people from marginalised communities. Yet, they do not assess the frequency and extent of discriminatory experiences and perceptions; quantitative data are needed for such an assessment.

Researchers in other contexts have experimented with direct survey questions to quantify experiences and perceptions of discrimination. For example, the General Social Survey measures black Americans' experiences and perceptions of discrimination (Bobo et al 2012). Despite this precedent, measuring discrimination from self-reports is a developing science with open questions about how to obtain the most accurate responses. To what extent do people recognise discrimination when it happens to them? Does one's ability to recognise discrimination depend on how much one accepts discriminatory treatment or internalises negative stereotypes of one's group? To what extent are respondents willing to discuss traumatic experiences with interviewers? What determines people's perceptions of discrimination? The results presented in this article attempt to provide tentative answers to some of these questions as they relate to the measurement of

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discrimination against Dalits and Muslims in India.

### The SARI Survey

SARI is a mobile phone survey of adults between the age of 18 and 65, which collected data on 8,065 respondents in Delhi, Uttar Pradesh (UP), Rajasthan and Mumbai between April 2016 and May 2017. SARI builds representative samples of adults using random digit dialing and within-household respondent selection. Estimates are weighted based on the distributions of education, sex, age, and location (urban/rural) in the 2011 Census. Table 1 reports sample sizes for people from different social groups in each of the places surveyed.

**Table 1: Number of Respondents in Each Social Group**

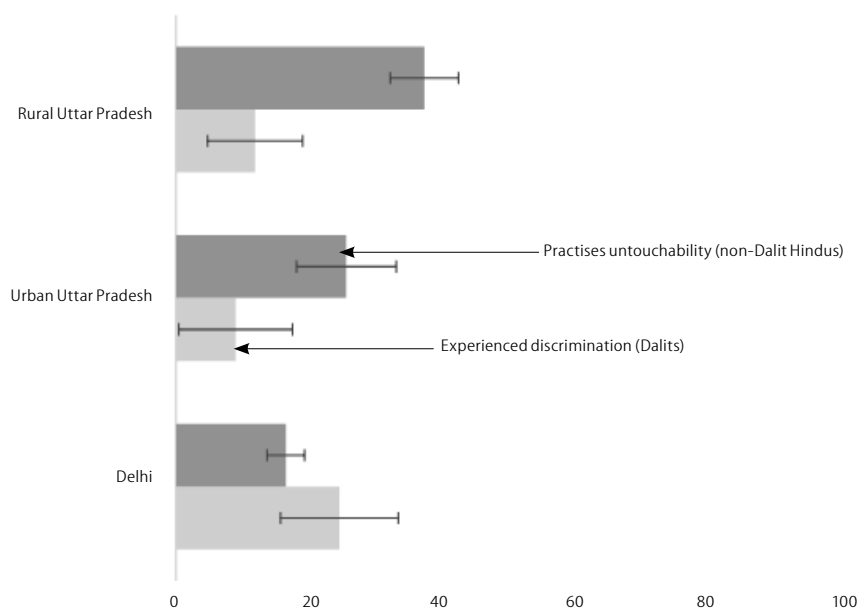
|                          | Delhi | Uttar Pradesh (UP) | Mumbai | Rajasthan |
|--------------------------|-------|--------------------|--------|-----------|
| Dalit                    | 130   | 169                | 200    | 534       |
| Muslim <sup>1</sup>      | 179   | 264                | 353    | 295       |
| Neither Dalit nor Muslim | 1,102 | 1,166              | 1,142  | 2,529     |
| Total <sup>2</sup>       | 1,411 | 1,599              | 1,695  | 3,360     |

Source: SARI (2016–17).

SARI asked Dalits and Muslims in UP and Delhi, “In the past five years, have you ever felt that anyone disrespected or insulted you because of your caste/your religion?” If a respondent said yes, they were asked to describe what happened on the most recent instance. Despite the fact that research from other contexts finds that open-ended questions to respondents who say they have experienced discrimination substantiate self-reports (Smith 2002), most respondents in the SARI sample declined to describe a particular incident to which they were referring when they answered “yes.” We do not fully understand why reactions to the open-ended question differed from prior studies, but we hypothesise that the extent of shame or distress in sharing details about poor treatment may be higher in the places we surveyed than in places with stronger social movements that encourage people from marginalised groups to reject discriminatory treatment as wrong and undeserved.

Figure 1 presents estimates of the fraction of Dalits in UP and Delhi who say they have experienced disrespect or insults because of their caste. It

**Figure 1: Comparison of Dalits’ Reports of Experiencing Discrimination with Non-Dalits’ Reports of Practising Untouchability**



Source: SARI (2016–17).

contrasts these results with the fraction of non-Dalit Hindus who answer “yes” to the question: “Do you practise untouchability?”<sup>3</sup> In Delhi, the fraction of Dalits who say they were disrespected or insulted because of their caste is statistically similar to the fraction of non-Dalits who say they practise untouchability, whereas in rural and urban UP, the fraction of non-Dalits who say they practise untouchability is higher.

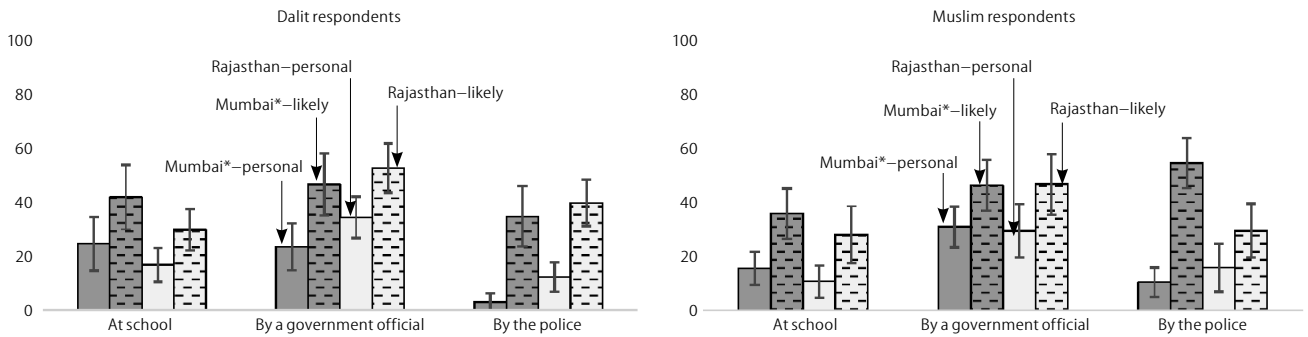
We might have expected a better match between the two sets of estimates within places. However, there are several possible reasons for the mismatches we observe. First, the question asked of Dalits encompasses experiences of discrimination and prejudice broadly, while the question posed to non-Dalits is about untouchability in particular. Second, both sets of estimates may suffer from social desirability bias: some non-Dalits may be unwilling to admit to practising untouchability, and some Dalits and Muslims may not be comfortable sharing experiences of mistreatment. The impact of social desirability bias on answers may differ for the two questions and across places.

Although it is not reported in the figure, we note that Muslim respondents were also asked about their experiences of discrimination. Twelve percent of Muslims in Delhi, 6% of Muslims in rural UP, and 8% of Muslims in urban UP reported

being disrespected or insulted based on their religion in the past five years. These numbers are similar to the results found for Dalits. For reasons that we will discuss further below, we suspect that these figures underestimate the true extent of experiences of discrimination.

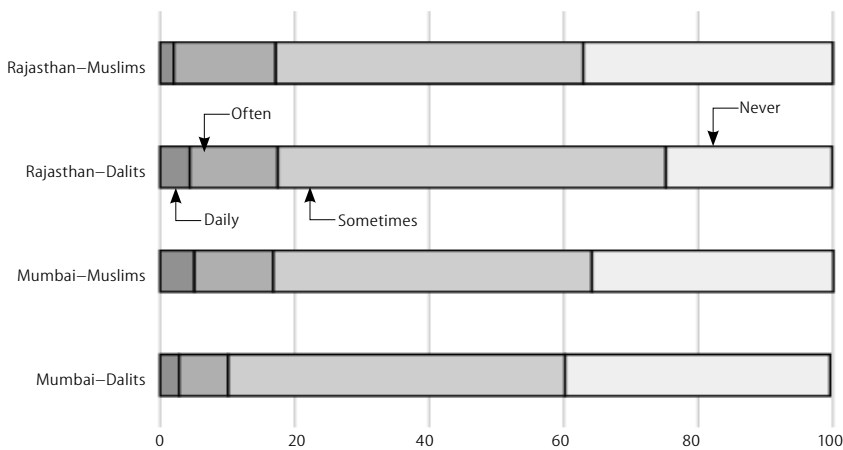
Based on research that finds that asking about discrimination in specific settings yields more accurate results than asking general questions (Smith 2002), SARI experimented with different questions in Mumbai and Rajasthan than were used in Delhi and UP. Half of Dalit and Muslim respondents were asked about personal experiences of discrimination in three specific settings. For example: “Now we will talk about school and college. Have you ever felt that you have personally been discriminated against in school or college because you are a Dalit/Muslim?” Similar questions were asked about interactions with the police and with government officials. The other half of respondents were asked about their perceptions of the likelihood that people from their group would face discrimination in each setting. For example: “Now we will talk about school and college. In your opinion, how likely is it for a Dalit/Muslim to face discrimination at school or college? Is it highly likely, somewhat likely, or not very likely to happen?”

**Figure 2: Personal Reports of Discrimination versus Perceptions That Discrimination Is Likely or Very Likely**



\* Results for Mumbai include only men; women were not interviewed in Mumbai. Source: SARI (2016–17).

**Figure 3: Perceived Frequency of Discrimination by Dalits and Muslims in Rajasthan and Mumbai**



Source: SARI (2016–17).

Figure 2 shows results by place and social group. Results for Mumbai include only men; women were not interviewed in Mumbai. Results for Rajasthan pool both men and women. Among the results in Figure 2, we note that about 25% of Dalits and 30% Muslims in Mumbai, and 35% of Dalits and 30% of Muslims in Rajasthan say they personally experienced discrimination in interactions with a government official. Reports of discrimination at school are also high, ranging from 10% to 25% across places and groups. Reports of discrimination in interactions with the police are lower.

Even though reported rates of discrimination in schools and in interactions with government officials are worryingly high, they are likely to underestimate the problem. Prior research finds that discrimination by authorities and failure to take action against complaints is related to under-reporting in surveys (Smith 2002). Considering that the enforcement of the laws to protect marginalised communities is often woefully inadequate,

this may be a reason for under-reporting in this context also.

Figure 2 also shows that across settings, a higher percentage of respondents say that people from their group are “likely” or “very likely” to experience discrimination than they are to report a personal experience. This difference may be because perceptions of the likelihood of discrimination draw on a broader set of experiences (perhaps of family and friends, or from media reports) than personal experiences. It may also be because talking about hypothetical instances of discrimination is less uncomfortable than talking about one’s personal experiences.

**Frequency of Discrimination**

We also measured people’s perceptions of how often people in their group face discrimination. Not only can one’s perceptions about discrimination influence psychological well-being, it may also influence their expectations and aspirations (Schmitt et al 2014; Singh et al 2009). In

Rajasthan and Mumbai, Dalit and Muslim respondents were asked: “In your opinion, how often does it happen that a Dalit/Muslim person in your state faces discrimination? Does it happen every day, often, sometimes, or never?” Figure 3 shows responses to this question. In both places, more than 6 in 10 Dalits and Muslims believe that people in their communities face discrimination daily, often, or sometimes. For Dalits in Rajasthan, this is close to 8 in 10 individuals.

**Discussion**

Some of the findings we have presented may seem puzzling. Why, in some places, does the percentage of Dalits who say they have experienced discrimination seem low relative to the percentage of non-Dalits who say they practise untouchability? Why does a higher percentage of people say that their group is likely to face discrimination, relative to the percentage of people who say that they have experienced discrimination? One important reason may be that reporting discrimination feels uncomfortable or threatening. We note that under-reporting of victimisation is a problem outside of survey research as well. For instance, violence against Dalits, Muslims, Adivasis, and women often goes unreported to the authorities (Navsarjan and RFK Center 2010; Gupta 2014). Under-reporting of victimisation may be especially high in a political climate in which incidents such as lynchings of Dalits and Muslims go unpunished.

Prior research on discrimination in the United States suggests additional reasons why self-reports may underestimate the actual prevalence of discrimination. The National Research Council (2004) reviews

research that finds that asking black Americans about experiences of discrimination can produce underestimates because respondents may not know whether negative outcomes, such as failure to get a promotion or to be allowed to rent a flat, are due to social group membership, or some other reason. It also suggests that before the civil rights movement, black Americans may have under-reported discrimination because they were not socialised to recognise and condemn it. SARI is currently collecting data in Maharashtra, which has had a strong Dalit movement. Reporting of experiences of discrimination may be higher in Maharashtra than in the states we study here.

More research is needed to develop ways to capture experiences of discrimination in quantitative surveys. A set of methodologically sound survey questions would permit tracking trends, and would become an important indicator of social progress. Yet, our results present sufficient evidence to suggest that greater efforts must be made, starting now, to improve Dalits' and Muslims' experiences with schools and government officials, as these are the institutions we

supposedly rely on to help create a more just society.

#### NOTES

- 1 The 24 Dalit Muslims across the four samples are included in the Muslim category, but not the Dalit category. Among them three individuals answered both sets of questions.
- 2 Across samples and questions, non-response for questions on experiences and perceptions of discrimination ranges from 4% to 23%.
- 3 In Delhi and UP, before people were asked whether they personally practise untouchability, they were first asked if someone in their family practised untouchability. This screening may have had discouraged "yes" responses and led to under-reporting of the practice of untouchability.

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