

<http://www.firstpost.com/politics/%e2%80%9ci-don%e2%80%99t-want-to-be-called-a-reservationist%e2%80%9d-dalit-leader-in-u-s-59475.html>

Lagaan did not impress me, it was a stereotype: Dalit leader in US

Bernice Yeung Aug 12, 2011

[#Aarakshan](#) [#B. R. Ambedkar](#) [#Benjamin P. Kaila](#) [#Dalit](#) [#TheInsider](#)

Benjamin P. Kaila, a Christian Dalit, grew up in poverty in a village near Tenali in Andhra Pradesh. Now a software professional in Southern California, he rallies donors across the world to support the Dalit community in five Indian states. Since 2003 his non-profit [Friends for Education International](#) has distributed more than \$120,000 in the form of microloans, scholarships and aid to victims of violence. On 20 August, it will celebrate the eighth anniversary of its Ambedkar Scholarship for Dalit children and give out another \$20,000.

As Aarakshan opens in India amidst controversy about its subject matter, Kaila who has lived in the US since 1999 discusses his view on reservation, US-style affirmative action and whether movies can bring social change.

Your foundation started with scholarships for Dalit children. How did that start?



I am a Dalit and I grew up in a small village. I lived all my life poor. I experienced a lot of discrimination in school, workplace, and in society. I was doubly discriminated because I am Christian and Dalit.

I have a belief that only education can bring us from that limbo, the state we are in as Dalits. Because my parents were teachers, they gave me a good foundation at an early age. But very few people in my community could aspire to do anything; most were illiterate. Only a few people can afford private education, the rich people. After I graduated from college, I could still not speak a single sentence in English.

But I came to learn about Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. I got inspired a lot by him. I started studying about society. That is how I improved my English, by reading books, and by listening to the radio. After reading Dr. Ambedkar, I wanted to start a school in my native place for Dalit children. I came to the US in 1999 on a H-1B visa, and sitting in the US, it is easier for me to monitor a smaller thing versus a school. So in 2003, I started two scholarships in the name of my mother and father, one for a girl and one for a boy. I distributed Rs 5,000, a big amount for Dalit students.

After coming to the US, I interacted with Dalits outside of India online, and I became one of the vocal people in those groups. In an email, I said, "I want to do this." People started coming to me saying, "We will help you." Slowly, it started, and now we are giving away every year about 10 lakhs.

Did you face discrimination when you were living in India?