

Editorial

Caste Violence In UK: Strange But True

Danish Khan

There is little doubt that the large presence of people from different regions of India, now living in the United Kingdom, has added to the cultural richness of contemporary British society. With them has come the 'Indian curry', served in thousands of restaurants all over the United Kingdom. In fact, curry has become a national dish in Britain.

Insular community

But unfortunately, unlike the curry - that offers a rich blend of different spices and influences - the Indian community in Britain still tends to be insular. Nothing indicates this as emphatically as its failure to accord a respectable status to the Dalits within the community, estimated to number 2,00,000. Discrimination based on caste, once talked about only in hushed tones, is now increasingly coming out into the open. Several recent studies indicate that Dalits in Britain face discrimination in the workplace, in schools, and even in health institutions.

As part of their efforts to document and prove that discrimination on the basis of caste does take place, some men and women who have actually experienced caste discrimination at first hand have, with the help of local civil society organisations, presented their case before a select committee of the House of Lords.

One such case involved a young couple who faced discrimination at their workplace from a highly caste conscious management. Their travails began when the girl, Talvinder (name changed) and Ajay (name changed) decided to get married. Both worked for a solicitors' firm in the Midlands. Talvinder happened to belong to a higher caste than Ajay.

As Talvinder put it in her statement before the committee, "This decision was the beginning of the problems which I could never imagine was possible in this country." Ajay, who was considered to be bright, and a key and trusted member of the firm in which he worked, suddenly found himself at the receiving end of the management's displeasure.

One of the partners of the firm - who came from the same caste as Talvinder - first tried to discourage her from going ahead with the marriage by advising her as an 'elder brother'. The couple gradually realised that they were up against a hostile management that was now paying more attention to their personal lives than their professional inputs.

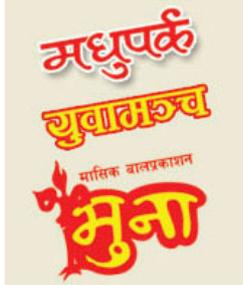
The couple received a huge shock when Ajay was told by the administrators of the 'gurudwara' (Sikh temple) where the couple had booked their marriage ceremony that they would not be able to go ahead with the event. When Ajay asked for reasons why this was the case, he was told that since he was not a Sikh and belonged to a low caste, he could not get married in the 'gurudwara'. "The source of the 'gurudwara' later transpired to be my employer," Talvinder told the members of the House of Lords.

It was not just at the workplace where the firm's partners were using their influence to create obstacles for this marriage, as Talvinder and Ajay discovered to their dismay. Such behaviour was driven perhaps, as Talvinder mentions in her statement, by the feeling that she was 'not being sensitive to the code of behaviour expected from a high caste young female' and was bringing 'shame to the honour of high caste people around in the workplace'.

The courageous young couple's problems did not end there. Even after they got married, the 'bullying, intimidation and discrimination' only increased manifold.

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Today, they continue to face an indifferent and uncooperative management. In her concluding statement Talvinder noted that she was "...giving this testimony in the hope that it would consider change in the legislation so that Asians in this country are made aware that caste based discrimination, same as racial discrimination, is not acceptable in British society. As a law professional, I know that Ajay is not the only one who has been victimised. People are too scared to come forward and give testimonies because of the serious consequences for them."

The House of Lords has already voted to ban caste discrimination, and activists believe United Kingdom is on its way to become the first European country to recognise it as racism.

The government is waiting for a report on a study it has commissioned to determine the extent of caste-based discrimination. Davinder Prasad, general secretary of CasteWatchUK, which has been at the forefront of the campaign, is confident that the National Institute of Economic and Social Research will find enough evidence to prove that individuals in the UK face discrimination because of his or her caste.

"People feel ashamed to share the fact that they were discriminated because they belong to a lower caste. However, many victims are coming forward and I am sure the National Institute of Economic and Social Research that is conducting the study will find plenty of instances. Hopefully, there should not be any hiccups. It is shameful but we have to face the reality," said Prasad.

CasteWatchUK has also pointed out the reference to caste in textbooks prescribed for schools in UK, which are "working towards making Britain a caste-conscious society".

Revealed Prasad, "We had meetings with the relevant authorities to stop the use of such textbooks two years ago. However, nothing satisfactory was achieved. We will continue our fight to get such books banned," he said.

One such book has the picture of a cobbler with the caption: "This man is a cobbler. His work involves leather, and since contact with the skin of dead animals is particularly polluting, he is a 'Harijan'. No Hindu from a higher caste would consider doing this sort of work."

Prasad thinks that the use of such textbooks make students of Indian origin only too aware of caste as an institution, and it could lead to discrimination and bullying in schools. "As they grow they carry forward with them the same mentality. The problem is particularly acute in pockets where there is a huge Indian population. It has to be made clear that caste discrimination can't be allowed to happen at this age in Britain," said Prasad.

Surnames

Activists argue that the caste of a person is easily revealed by his or her surnames. In this way, the significant Dalit community in Britain continues to be the subject of bullying, discrimination and harassment.

In a report titled 'No Escape: Caste Discrimination in UK', which came out in July 2006, Ram Lakha, a Labour politician, narrated his plight. "During campaigning I was often told that I would not get people's vote as I was a 'chamar'. So I filed my nomination in a non-Asian constituency and was able to win. The Indian community in Coventry always felicitates every new mayor, however, till today they have not done this for me."

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