

## House of Lords debate on caste discrimination in India (26 November 2011)

### India

#### *Question for Short Debate*

5.53 pm

*Asked by Lord Harries of Pentregarth*

#### **To ask Her Majesty's Government what is their assessment of the challenges facing the government of India on the issues of poverty and caste discrimination.**

**Lord Harries of Pentregarth (CB):** My Lords, India is one of the most ancient civilisations in the world which has had, to take just one example, a highly sophisticated level of mathematics from the 12th century up to today. Its achievements are truly staggering. India produces 5 million graduates a year and one-third of the world's software engineers. It is the world's largest democracy and earlier this year ran a successful election in which 540 million people voted; 66.4% of those eligible. The new Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, comes with the clear support of the majority of the population and the world can only wish him well as he faces the challenges of poverty and caste discrimination.

Those problems are on a massive scale. One in six Indian women is illiterate and India has more absolute poverty than the whole of Africa put together. In particular, there are people who suffer extreme degradation, the Dalits—the former untouchables. More than 320 million people in India live below the national poverty line. Of these, some 200 million are Dalits or scheduled castes. Caste discrimination, one of the most serious ongoing human rights violations in the world today, has rightly been described by the former Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as “a blot on humanity”.

Dalits, who occupy the lowest position in the caste system—strictly speaking, outside it altogether—continue to suffer deeply hurtful rejection, violence, poverty and a level of exploitation which often amounts to modern-day slavery. India has a very fine constitution and excellent legislation but, sadly, there is little political will or judicial capacity to enforce the laws. The result is that caste discrimination continues with impunity and its worst excesses culminate in the rape and murder of Dalit girls and women every day. That extreme disparity between a financial elite, and those who can tuck in the slipstream behind them, and the millions

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC302**

who are left far behind—which is such a feature of the world as a whole today—exists in India in extreme form.

According to official Indian crime statistics, more than three Dalit women are raped every day. You may have read of the recent case of the two young Dalit girls, raped and murdered in Uttar Pradesh. Like many in India, they had no access to water or the most basic of sanitation facilities, forcing them to defecate in the open fields. This put them, and millions like them, at risk. However, it was because they were Dalit girls that they were particularly vulnerable and regarded as “fair” targets for the violence meted out against them. This case received global media attention and it is important to note that this was the first time a

story about Dalits received such publicity even though these types of crime against Dalits happen every day. Until now there has been no public outrage or political will to address them.

That is violence against women, but it is not just women who are subject to such brutality. Another case which reached the world press a couple of weeks ago concerned a boy who allowed his goat to wander on to land owned by a higher-caste family. The boy was murdered on the grounds that he had made the land unclean. What is no less terrible than the crimes themselves is that no action seems to have been taken against the perpetrators, once again highlighting a fundamental aspect of the problem: that although there are good laws in place, they are simply not being enforced when the victims are Dalits because of pressure from the families of the perpetrators. There is a law in place— the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989—but it is simply not being enforced. Implementation and conviction rates are less than 5%, mainly due to the mindset of the general populace, the apathy of the judiciary and lack of political will.

I urge the United Kingdom Government to offer technical assistance to develop the capacity of the judiciary and police to deal more effectively with these crimes against Dalits. In particular, what is needed is, first, to improve accountability through better documentation, investigations and prosecutions, and better legislation implementing international obligations and standards. Secondly, what is needed is greater support and protection to survivors of sexual violence, including children. Thirdly, we need to ensure that the responses to sexual and gender-based violence, and the promotion of gender equality, are fully integrated in the security and justice sector and also in all military and police training.

There is in India a tension, a paradox that affects the human spirit itself. On the one hand there is the sheer scale of the problem: a country with a population four times the size of America; so much corruption and a political class too often out of touch with how the majority live. This makes it all too easy to despair. Yet the sheer resilience of the Indian poor simply in surviving always staggers me. There is something else too. On one visit with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association a couple of years ago to look at aid projects, the group I was with had a session with some girls who had been able to stay on at school,

### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC303**

with the support of a few pence a day which their day labourer fathers could not afford. They had bussed 12 hours to see us, and in their smart uniforms they shared with us their ambitions to be doctors, teachers and politicians. They came from nowhere with nothing, but they had confidence and they had hope. In Rohinton Mistry's devastating novel,

*A Fine Balance*

, about the appalling suffering of lower castes in India, one character says:

“You have to maintain a fine balance between hope and despair”.

Since taking up office, Mr. Modi has offered some hope. Traditionally many Dalits, for generation after generation, were allowed to work only as manual scavengers, but last month he launched his Clean India mission to modernise sanitation within five years. He started by trying to change attitudes, and he set a personal example by taking a broom and sweeping up rubbish in a Delhi neighbourhood occupied by members of the Valmiki sub-caste, whose lot in life is traditionally manual scavenging, a euphemism for clearing other people's faeces. Mr. Mohdi said:

“Often we assume the job of cleaning up belongs to the safai karmacharis and don't bother to clean”,

and he went on,

“Don’t we all have a duty to clean the country?”.

To drive home his point, he ordered government workers, including his Ministers, to come to work on the Thursday to sweep offices and clean toilets. He made a similar commitment to end poverty and bring the shame of so many rapes to an end.

He has, however, so far as I can find, said nothing on the caste system itself, which is at the root of the problem. The fundamental point is that there is an inescapable connection in India between its massive, degrading poverty and the caste system. The poverty cannot be tackled without facing and dealing with the reality that this poverty affects those at the bottom of the caste system in a totally disproportionate way. I urge Her Majesty’s Government to bring this point home to the Indian Government and to offer help, particularly in strengthening the judiciary.

Recently the impressive Indian space programme sent a spacecraft into orbit around Mars. It was the first country that managed to do so on its first attempt and the first Asian country to achieve that. It has the technical ability and political will to achieve there. It has the technical ability and the skilled human resources to bring clean water and sanitation to millions of people now without these basics, a lack of which makes women in particular so vulnerable to violence. Has it got the political will to do this?

We had a wonderful example recently from the Bikaner district in Rajasthan, where local leadership, getting the whole community activated, actually managed to improve 500 toilets in 10 days, with the villages working themselves. Faecal-related diseases went down from more than 50 a month to one or two. Where there is a will, things can happen.

Mr. Modi has said he wants every Indian to have a bank account. However important that may be in the modern world, surely it is not as important as access to clean water and sanitation. Is there a political will

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC304**

to do this? Is there a political will to bring about equal concern and respect for all members of the society? Is there the courage to see that this cannot be done without looking at the way these terrible ills are linked through caste? The world wishes Mr. Modi well, and I very much hope that the British Government will strengthen him in his resolve.

#### **6.02 pm**

**Lord Cashman (Lab):** My Lords, speaking on this subject gives me no satisfaction whatever because it is a subject that should have been left in the shadows of the history of the 19th century, which we are dealing with only now, in the 21st century.

As the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, said, this affects men, women and children every single minute of every single day. It is easy to run off the figure of 250 million people, but imagine half the population of the 28 member states of the European Union, and then you have something approaching the magnitude of the issue with which we are dealing.

I spoke on this on many occasions in my 15 years in the European Parliament, not only on the petitions committee and the justice and home affairs committee but on the international development committee, and that is where we place that focus today. I will not refer to the cases to which the noble and right reverend Lord has referred. The most recent case is of the goat herder. In all these things, as I said in my

maiden speech, we always have to use the power of the imagination: “What if that were me? What if that were my daughter, my mother, my father, my family? Would it be okay?”. If not, it cannot be right for another.

Let me refer to what others have said. The Indian National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights gives the following description of who the Dalits are in the context of caste system in south Asia:

“Historically, the caste system has formed the social and economic framework for the life of the people of India. In its essential form, this caste system involves the division of people into a hierarchy of unequal social groups where basic rights and duties are assigned based on birth”—

these are not my words—

“and are not subject to change. Dalits are ‘outcastes’ falling outside the traditional four classes ... Dalits are typically considered low, impure and polluting”—

again, the issue of the goat herder demonstrates that forcefully—

“based on their birth and traditional occupation, thus they face multiple forms of discrimination, violence, and exclusion from the rest of society”.

The International Dalit Solidarity Network, with which I had the privilege and pleasure to work in the European Parliament, lists the following key issues affecting Dalits in the modern day. It is a sad list because it is not academic but a list of that which happens every single day. The list includes:

“Bonded labour in which a person is bonded by a loan advance taken against their work, resulting in a loss of control over labour conditions and terms of work ... Violence and inhuman treatment, such as sexual assault, rape, and naked parading, against Dalit women serving as a social mechanism to maintain their subordinate position in society ... The forced prostitution of Dalit girls. Originally a sacred, religious practice, the dedication of girls to temples has turned into a systematic

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC305**

sexual abuse of young Dalit girls serving as prostitutes for dominant caste community members and subsequent auctioning into brothels ... Discrimination against Dalits in the educational system”—

an education system should be a mechanism to lift people up out of poverty, persecution and discrimination, but within that education system we see,

“segregation ... in class rooms and harassment by teachers”.

Then there is manual scavenging—and yes, I will go into what that means. It is,

“a term used to describe the job of removing human excrement from dry toilets and sewers using basic tools such as thin boards, buckets and baskets, lined with sacking, carried on the head, which is a caste-based and hereditary occupation for Dalits”.

The list goes on to say that Dalits,

“are often limited from equal and meaningful political participation”,

but I am pleased to see that that is at last changing. Then, of course, there is the,

“non-implementation of constitutional and legislative measures to protect the rights of Dalits”.

It is interesting, as I approach the final chapter of this six minutes, to look at what the International Development Committee in the other place proposed. It said:

“India has high levels of inequality—particular castes, tribes, and religious groups do less well than others because of entrenched discriminatory practices and despite laws against such behaviour” —

hence why we need cultural and educational change. They met groups of Dalits,

“including children, who were beginning to challenge social norms”,

but they are not hopeful that these changes will come during the lifetimes of these individuals. The committee encourages DfID to,

“place greater explicit emphasis on tackling inequalities throughout DFID’s programmes”.

That is what I ask the Government to report back on, if they can now. It is vitally important, as the noble and right reverend Lord said, that we deal with capacity building, reforming institutions and the accountability of the police. But at the end of all this, we also have to deal with the tricky notion of religion as an excuse or a reason. No religion can be an excuse or a reason imposed on another—or on 250 million—to diminish them and rob them of their civil liberties and human rights.

**6.09 pm**

**Lord Dholakia (LD):** My Lords, I thank the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, for this debate and welcome his contribution. This debate is timely because we now have a new Government and a new Prime Minister in India. The diplomatic isolation of India is over. We in Britain have a long-standing interest in India. Educational, historic, cultural and people-to-people ties have replaced the excesses of colonial empire. With an Indian diaspora of 1.5 million, the link between the world’s oldest and the world’s largest democracy will continue to flourish.

Let us look at the issue of poverty in the context of the challenges facing India. Sixty per cent of India’s population is below the age of 35. It is estimated that 10 million to 15 million young people enter the labour market each year. India needs to create about 1 million jobs per month to absorb new entrants to the workforce.

**26 Nov 2014 : Column GC306**

The industrial sector is crying out for investment and reform, securing income for farmers and rebuilding outdated infrastructure. As the noble and right reverend Lord said, a substantial population still lives below the poverty line.

Despite these challenges, most observers expect India to become the world’s third largest economy by 2030. People’s expectations are great, and Mr Modi has not disappointed them. We have seen clarity in his vision on domestic matters. Prime Minister Modi’s Independence Day speech on 15 August set out his vision on governance which included a plea for a united, selfless, skilled and peaceful India. He expressed his concern about rape, equality and the safety of women and girls. He took the momentous occasion of the Independence Day of India on 15 August to make this speech to a large gathering. It was reported right across the length and breadth of India. He also talked about the devolution of power and control which would result in more economic liberalisation and less central control. He launched his flagship programme aimed at tackling poverty by ending financial untouchability. He said:

“Economic resources of the country should be utilised for the wellbeing of the poor”.

So we now have a champion in Mr Modi, who has risen from a humble beginning, from a lower caste, to the top of the political structure in India.

Let me now turn to caste discrimination. We abhor discrimination of any kind based on race, colour or national or ethnic origin. This equally applies to gender discrimination or discrimination based on sexual orientation and disability. Discrimination based on caste is unacceptable. India has a powerful human rights commission and an impressive record of how it treats such issues. I have been there, and I have seen how it acts on issues referred to it. India also has a powerful judiciary which, unlike in any other country in the world, often challenges the lack of action by the legislators, which is a remarkable achievement. I have no doubt that concerted efforts by the new Government, the judiciary, the human rights commission and the new generation of the young educated class will challenge centuries-old traditions in India.

The right of minorities are protected under India's constitution. Let me remind noble Lords that this was well before this country even thought of race relations or equality legislation. There is already machinery in place. I accept that whether it is effective is something we should be looking at, but the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989 deal with untouchability, atrocities, national overseas scholarships for scheduled caste and scheduled tribes candidates and a number of other initiatives designed as positive action leading towards equality of opportunity for all citizens. The 1989 Act clearly defines what needs to be done in any case where the practice of untouchability is noticed.

I am further encouraged by Prime Minister Modi's statement on Independence Day. He said:

"Even after Independence, we have had to face the poison of casteism and communalism. How long these evils will continue? Whom does it benefit? We have had enough of fights, many have been killed. Friends, look behind you and you will find that

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC307**

nobody has benefited from it. Except casting a slur on Mother India, we have done nothing. Therefore, I appeal to all those people that whether it is the poison of casteism, communalism, regionalism, discrimination on social and economic basis, all these are obstacles in our way forward".

There is recognition at the highest level of the evil of caste discrimination. There is the legislative framework to tackle such practices in India. The barriers of caste are breaking down in the new generations of Indians emerging with better education and social responsibility. In Britain, we have moved away from the old values of compartmentalising communities based on caste. Generations have grown up over the years who see no obstacles to crossing the caste divide. We must remember that any time we deny anyone equality of opportunity based on any grounds, we weaken our own claims to have a fair and just society.

**6.16 pm**

**Lord Alton of Liverpool (CB):** My Lords, no one has done more to keep the issues of caste, untouchability and the Dalits before your Lordships' House than my noble and right reverend friend Lord Harries of Pentregarth. Earlier this year I was very privileged, as I feel I am again today, to share a platform with him at a conference here in London that looked at the issue of caste.

To prepare for that conference, I read Dhananjay Keer's admirable biography of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, who was the architect of the Indian constitution, which the noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, just referred to. He was born into a family of untouchables in 1891, and he said:

“Untouchability is far worse than slavery, for the latter may be abolished by statute. It will take more than a law to remove the stigma from the people of India. Nothing less than the aroused opinion of the world can do it”.

In the speeches we have heard already in this debate, we have heard the aroused conscience of the world. No one, therefore, is attacking the state of India. It has done a great deal to try to address this question. My noble and right reverend friend quoted Dr Manmohan Singh, and many illustrious Indian politicians have done their best to try to tackle this problem, but the sheer scale of it is what has struck me most in the contributions we have heard so far.

It was Ambedkar who, while still a young man, aged just 20, pointed to perhaps the best way forward in dealing with this issue. He said:

“Let your mission be to educate and preach the idea of education to those at least who are near to and in close contact with you”.

As other noble Lords have said, education is the key to addressing the poverty and exploitation of Dalits in India. Education provides the knowledge, skills and qualifications that have the potential to help Dalits escape the cycle of poverty and exploitation.

The Indian Government have made considerable efforts to address this, not least through the right to education Act 2009, and initiatives such as Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, which aims for universal access and retention, the bridging of gender and social gaps in education and the enhancement of learning levels. Enrolment, attendance and retention levels have improved,

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC308**

but there are still significant issues around attendance and drop-out rates, particularly among Dalit children. The Human Rights Watch report,

*“They Say We’re Dirty”: Denying an Education to India’s Marginali*

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, which was published earlier this year, highlights the number of Dalit children who drop out of education and the persistence of discriminatory practices in the classroom. The report calls for better tracking of pupils and greater efforts to ensure social inclusion.

I will develop that point about non-attendance at school because it plays into the arguments that we are discussing in the context of the Modern Slavery Bill and human trafficking. The economic pressure on marginalised groups gives families little choice but to require their children to work or even in some instances in effect to sell their children. Dalit Freedom Network, a trafficking prevention organisation, estimates that Dalits are 27 times more likely to be trafficked or to be trapped in bonded labour than anyone else in India. The organisation supports 100 schools, providing education to more than 25,000 children, mainly from the Dalit and tribal communities. It estimates that if the children were not in their schools, some 30% to 40% would be trafficked or in bonded labour.

Although enrolment levels have improved in Indian schools, there are still issues around obtaining school places, particularly where there is an insistence on identity documents. Some Dalits have had immense difficulty in getting hold of ID. There is a particular issue around children of Devadasis or Joginis—temple

prostitutes—almost all of whom are Dalits. The nature of this practice means that their mothers do not have husbands, so when the school insists on having the name of the child's father, the children are unable to provide this, and as a result, they are refused places. The authorities also need to focus not simply on enrolment but on retention of every child in school until at least the age of 14. A system to track and monitor children is essential, along with a protocol for identifying those who have dropped out or who are at risk of dropping out.

Although current thinking in development often calls for education in the local language—and I will be interested to hear from the Minister on DfID's thinking about this—there are particular reasons why Dalit leaders have asked for English-medium education. English is still the language of opportunity in India. It is the language of higher education, government, trade and commerce and the legal system. Why else would children of high-caste families be sent to private English-medium education? In the district of Banka, Bihar, the Dalit community has constructed a temple for,

“the Goddess English hailing her as a deity of liberation from poverty, ignorance and oppression”.

The goddess stands on a computer monitor, a symbol perhaps of economic advancement. I would be intrigued to hear from the Minister whether this is an approach that we are supporting. I hope it is.

I would also like to talk briefly about Dalits and the freedom of religion and belief. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights insists that it is the right of anyone to hold the religion of their choice. Over the past several hundred years, many Dalits have changed their faith in order to come out of oppression

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC309**

and discrimination based on caste. Ironically, only untouchable Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists are considered “scheduled castes” and therefore registered castes with entitlements to state support, such as protective mechanisms under various pieces of legislation and quotas for places at university and for employment in government services. Freedom of religion is a value for society as a whole. It is universally agreed that the internal dimension of a person's religion or belief should enjoy absolute protection. Have the Government spoken with the new Indian Government about whether they uphold Article 18?

Mahatma Gandhi said,

“Our struggle does not end so long as there is a single human being considered untouchable on account of his birth”.

India is incredible and amazing. It is one of the greatest countries in the world today. What is amazing and incredible is that there could still be untouchability, now, in the 21st century.

#### **6.22 pm**

**Lord Griffiths of Burry Port (Lab):** My Lords, I am conscious that I stand among people whose knowledge of this subject is far greater and more specific than my own. I will not detain your Lordships long.

The multifaceted nature of India as a country has been well referred to, on both the positive and the negative side. What impresses one about India is that a problem is always a big problem, even if we are talking about a small percentage of the total population. It worries me that the United Nations continues to point the finger at India in terms of its—shall we say—patchy record on poverty, dispossession, injustice and the rest of it, as I read in a report in yesterday's newspaper. The worry for me is that when the figures

are broken down, we see how disproportionately the suffering of all these injustices falls upon those who have few rights and a low place in society.

I am very glad that Mr Modi's inaugural address has been referred to. As I understand from reading it very quickly, a big emphasis was placed on improving sanitation. The word appears many times. Sanitation of itself is not going to solve the problem. It might cleanse the situations where the scavenging and the rest of it is done, but unless those who do the scavenging have entitlements to good homes, access to education and the possibility of flourishing and developing, that of itself will not do much good. Mr Modi is not the first-high ranking Indian politician to make promises or commitments.

Nor is India without its statutes on the statute book promising progress in this area—the 1989 Act has been referred to. The problem seems to be a lack of will to enforce the legislation that exists. The noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, suggested that we ask Her Majesty's Government to put pressure on the Indian authorities to support and perhaps to force those who implement law in India to actually apply the law that exists. I think that would go a long way towards progress in this area.

I began my life not scavenging in the same sense but scavenging on tips, crawling over refuse and picking it up in order that I and my family might survive—not excrement or anything like that, so I cannot say that it

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC310**

is in the same league. I simply know that dignity for me came through the educational path that was opened up for me. I can only hope that in India there will be a real concentration of effort to open these doorways of opportunity to people who are trapped outside the caste system. That is what we have to remember about the Dalits. The problem is not that they are lower caste; it is that they have no caste at all and therefore no position in society. It is the proportion of people in Indian society who suffer in this way that concerns me, as well as the fact that no action seems to be taken to implement legislation that is already on the statute book. I feel that it is legitimate to ask Her Majesty's Government to put what pressure they can on the Indian Government to look at these areas in order that we might have measurable outcomes in the years to come.

It is very important for us to recognise that the Dalit question is not limited to India. There is a diasporic presence of Dalits in the West—not as much as in the East but at least a significant presence—and the vulnerability of Dalits, as people without caste, to things such as trafficking, slavery, bonded labour and so on is a concern for all of us. Therefore, we should not limit our attention to the Indian Government, but wherever this problem exists, we should address it.

The question of religion has been raised; indeed, three of us here have known religious affiliations. I think the last thing that any of us would want is for us to be heard, as members of the Christian faith, pointing the finger at people of another faith. I do not think that it is a question of faith at all. Certainly, I do not think that the Christian community is free of involvement in the problem that we are discussing, and we should recognise that.

It is a question of caste. We live in a class-ridden society and we are looking at a caste-ridden society. People who are trapped, without the possibility of escaping from what entraps them, are people all of us should stand behind. The equalities that we proclaim here in this country that break people out of being bound by class are the equalities that we should espouse and adumbrate for people, wherever they may be, who seek to break out of the caste system. I can only hope that this short debate will sharpen our minds and strengthen our wills to work for a world where class and caste are a thing of the past.

**6.28 pm**

**Lord Loomba (LD):** My Lords, first, I thank the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries of Pentregarth, for initiating this debate on poverty and the caste system in India. As the noble Lord, Lord Dholakia, said, it is a timely discussion. However, I would like to point out that the theme of the debate is in fact global, because, in one form or another, poverty affects people everywhere. The scale may vary but the poor are poor, whether they are in the back streets of New York or the slums of Mumbai. Furthermore, if we stretch the argument a bit and think of the feudal system that prevails openly or latently, we will find a very rigid class system in many parts of the world. It is unfortunate that the caste system, which originated in

**26 Nov 2014 : Column GC311**

India over 2,000 years ago for categorising people according to their vocations, degenerated over the years to become a basis for discrimination.

The despicable stranglehold of caste and poverty now seems to be loosening in India. The fight-back by both the young and the Government appears to be succeeding. The Government have made discrimination due to caste a punishable offence. Young people under 35 make up 65% of India's 1.25 billion people. They are aspirational, ambitious and determined to achieve. More and more young and educated men and women are working long hours together in offices and they least bother about caste differences. This is happening in larger numbers in urban areas, especially the metros, where they are breaking caste boundaries.

This awareness and financial freedom have encouraged people to break the boundaries around castes. It will take time, but with an increasing number of Dalits and Backwards getting education and special facilities for employment and business, they have begun to occupy high posts and many have done very well as entrepreneurs and have become millionaires. Their ranks are swelling: from Backwards and Dalits, India has had a President, a Speaker, a Chief Justice of India and a Chief Minister. The discriminations are disappearing and there has likewise been a fast decline in poverty.

The policies of the Modi Government have given hope that poverty will be eradicated faster. The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has said that he would help the poor to earn, which would lift them out of poverty and give them dignity. The easing of FDI, the development of an economic atmosphere and facilities that encourage investors to come back, and the Make in India programme would create a huge number of jobs. Then the adoption of villages by MPs and the corporate sector, as well as the scheme to provide villages with all the urban facilities, would motivate the rural youth to strive and do well. The CLEAN-India programme would set up toilets in each village. India is within striking distance of ridding itself of the two horrible curses.

As noble Lords can see, I am from India originally. I go there quite often and I can give the Committee a practical example. At the village school where I started my education, there were only 245 students five years ago. Out of them, there were very few girls. My charity refurbished the school, putting in toilets and fresh drinking water. Today, the school is educating 550 students, out of which one-third are girls, so things are moving in the right direction. We need time and I think that, once these two horrible curses are finished, caste and poverty will be history.

**6.34 pm**

**Lord Collins of Highbury (Lab):** My Lords, I, too, thank the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, for initiating this debate. India, as we have heard, is the largest democracy in the world, with a population of

over 1.2 billion, and an emerging global power. It became a middle-income country in 2008 and, while it has made incredible progress in recent times in lifting millions out of poverty, the gap between the haves and the have-nots remains huge. Caste, ethnicity and feudalism remain strong drivers of inequality.

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC312**

Fifteen years ago there were only two dollar billionaires in India; today there are 46. The total net worth of India's billionaire community has climbed from about 1% of GDP to 12%, yet India spends less than 4% of GDP on the important areas of education and health. More than half of all children drop out of school before the age of 14, and the majority of those are female. Almost 12% of children between five and 15 are identified as child labour and there are about 2.4 million people living with HIV and AIDS. As we have heard, India is still home to one-third of the world's people living below \$1.25—that is 80p—a day and the average income is one-third that of China. The disparity between India's states is significant, too; eight of them are home to 65% of India's poor. Poverty reduction in these states remains critical to global success in meeting the MDGs.

In November 2012, the Secretary of State for International Development announced that from that point the UK would approve no new financial grant aid to India. What assessment has been made of the impact of DfID's efforts to responsibly complete by 2015 all commitments to ongoing projects? Will the Minister update the House on those programmes, which have been focused on the poorest people in India's low-income states, such as Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Orissa? What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the post-2015 framework specifically tackles economic and other inequalities within countries through goals, targets and other mechanisms?

As the debate has highlighted, poverty in India is not just economic; it is also linked to social factors. The Dalit community suffers serious deep abuse and discrimination, as we have heard from the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries. As we have also heard, despite positive government action and constitutional safeguards, excluded groups, when attempting to access their rights, often face a serious backlash, human rights violations and increasing atrocities amid a culture of impunity. As this debate has highlighted, it is not just about whether we have the laws; it is about whether those laws are implemented and complied with and whether people who break them can get away with it. I stress that point to the Minister.

**6.38 pm**

*Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.*

**6.48 pm**

**Lord Collins of Highbury:** My Lords, the clock has now started again, so I will be quick. As today's debate has strongly highlighted, it is not just about stronger laws; it is about implementation and compliance.

As I am talking about laws, I personally am sad that there is still no word on why India cannot rid itself of colonial laws that make homosexuality illegal. I hope that the Government can continue to make representations on that issue.

We have also heard in this debate about the diaspora community in the UK and the close relationship between India as the biggest democracy and the UK as the oldest. That also means that the issues that we have been debating today, particularly caste discrimination,

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC313**

relate to us in this country as well. They exist in this country—hence this House agreeing last year to add caste, as an aspect of race, to the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010.

I know that this is going slightly beyond the remit of this debate, but it is incredibly relevant. In May 2014, the Government announced that the first of the public consultations outlawing caste-based discrimination had been delayed until autumn this year. We are now nearing the end of autumn; for some of us it is well past the end. I know that it is not necessarily the responsibility of the noble Baroness, but I would be grateful if the Government would let us know when we can expect to see this consultation. How long can it be delayed? That concludes my remarks.

**6.50 pm**

**Baroness Northover (LD):** My Lords, I thank the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, for calling this debate. We all know that this is something he cares passionately about and he has, as ever, introduced the debate with great authority. The noble and right reverend Lord rightly stresses the achievements and potential of India but he also flags the vulnerability of those—especially Dalits—at the very edge of society there despite, as he said, the legislation in place which should protect them. As the noble Lord, Lord Alton, pointed out, we recognise the enormous contribution made by Dr Ambedkar in this regard. We also recognise that laws do not necessarily change societies, as various noble Lords, including the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, and the noble Lords, Lord Griffiths and Lord Alton, pointed out.

We noted that development through good governance was a central plank of Prime Minister Modi's election campaign. My noble friend Lord Dholakia laid out the Prime Minister's platform very clearly. After the announcement of the election results, in his acceptance speech to his party, Mr Modi promised a "government for the poor" working for the,

"security of the mothers and sisters, those in the rural areas, oppressed and the deprived".

In his Independence Day speech in August, to which my noble friend Lord Dholakia also referred, Prime Minister Modi went on to say that there were only two tracks to take the country forward: good governance and development. We welcome the focus he made on ending caste and communal violence in India. Prime Minister Modi has also announced a scheme for financial and insurance services for the poor in India to try to bring them in.

However, in spite of India's unprecedented levels of economic growth in recent years, significant challenges on poverty reduction remain, as noble Lords have made extremely clear. Statistics on caste discrimination show that these groups, particularly Dalit households, continue to perform worse than others. For example, mortality rates for Dalit children are 50% higher than those for children born in other families. Only one out of three Dalit girls completes five years of schooling compared to half in other communities.

This is not to say that the position of Dalits is static. Shifts in occupational patterns from agricultural wage labour to the non-agricultural sector can be seen

**26 Nov 2014 : Column GC314**

and the proportion of the Dalit population owning productive assets has increased. My noble friend Lord Loomba notes the huge progress that he has personally seen. Changes in discriminatory social and cultural norms, such as taboos on eating with Dalits, have been achieved through hard fought struggles by civil society groups committed to promoting equality. Mr Modi has also added more Dalit Ministers and ensured balanced representation for other castes, communities and states.

Mr Modi has also promised a number of other encouraging moves. He promised to stabilise prices and kick-start growth through a focus on infrastructure and investment, focus on labour-intensive sectors, medium, small and micro-enterprises and skills development and to raise education sector expenditure, while focusing on quality vocational and higher education. He also stated that he wants to achieve universal healthcare through an insurance route and promised to create 100 new cities, with a focus on corridors, transport, housing and sanitation—quite a programme, as noble Lords would agree.

The noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, and the noble Lord, Lord Griffiths, as well as my noble friend Lord Loomba, flagged the link between open defecation and danger, especially for women. Again, it is excellent that Mr Modi has launched the Clean India campaign to ensure that every home and school has a lavatory by 2019. He rightly emphasised the need to have lavatories for women and girls for their safety and well-being. The noble and right reverend Lord highlighted the terrible case of the two Dalit girls and their lack of safety in having to go out to a defecation field.

In India, DfID is deeply committed to ending all forms of marginalisation, as we are everywhere. Like the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, we recognise that ending poverty cannot be achieved without tackling issues of social exclusion, gender discrimination and equitable access to entitlements. The position of women has caused concern to many noble Lords, and rightly so. As my noble friend Lord Dholakia noted, in his Independence Day speech, Prime Minister Modi raised the issues of tackling violence against women and girls and of engaging boys and men to change stubborn social norms that perpetuate violence and discrimination. It is timely to note this today, as it is the second of 16 days of activism against gender-based violence, concluding on Wednesday 10 December with International Human Rights Day. Preventing violence against women is a top priority for the UK Government and DfID, and we are leading that campaign to combat violence against women and girls internationally. DfID works with the Government of India and other partners to ensure the delivery of services to all, with sufficient quality, strengthening the voice of marginalised people and promoting better accountability to them.

The noble and right reverend Lord raised a series of questions about technical assistance, the judiciary and the police, survivors of sexual violence and gender more generally. Our Poorest Areas Civil Societies programme aims to break discriminatory practices that prevent access to rights. I saw this in practice in Bhopal, where Dalit women, in particular, were being

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC315**

moved out of manual scavenging, very much encouraged by their children, who saw it as unacceptable. They encouraged their mothers to move into other work as it was opened up for them.

The noble Lord, Lord Cashman, spoke passionately of social norms and inequalities. Those social norms are exactly what DfID seeks to challenge, not least, of course, in relation to women and girls. Tackling inequalities that underlie poverty is precisely what DfID is all about.

The noble and right reverend Lord flagged up the judiciary and the police. DfID and the Indian Government are working together to strengthen accountability so that people are aware of and can claim their full rights. I hope that he is reassured by the work that is happening there.

The noble Lord, Lord Griffiths, spoke about the need to ensure that the law is implemented. One of the things that DfID is working on is ensuring that people, especially those in the Dalit community, know what their legal rights are. We have supported civil society groups to educate Dalits as well as influencing the judiciary and the police. Again, I hope that the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, is reassured.

In terms of violence against women and girls, noble Lords probably know that we are conducting a widespread approach to this subject, evaluating and researching what works best. I have just come back from a meeting where the South African Medical Research Council is taking forward some of this research. It was very striking to note the differences between the various continents. The type of gender violence that prevails in India is much more focused on intimate partner violence and differs in many ways from that in Africa. We need to understand how best to tackle all these challenges, including the role of alcohol as a catalyst, which seems to be significant in both areas.

Noble Lords rightly emphasised education. The noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, will be extremely familiar with the Odisha girls' incentive programme, which I think he saw when he visited India. We have been supporting Dalit girls and boys but have especially been trying to ensure that girls attend school through the use of cash scholarships. The programme will be continued by the Government of India. I hope that that reassures the noble Lord, Lord Collins, who wants to make sure that these programmes continue. Cash scholarships are conditional on 75% attendance, and they have proved to be quite transformative in terms of ensuring that girls are in school. They do not just start school; they go all the way through so that they can move on to secondary school.

The noble Lord, Lord Cashman, asked about the justice system. On 31 March the UK high commissioner and a former Chief Justice of India launched two publications on advice to the victims of sexual violence and for those who need support through the criminal justice system. I think that it was the noble Lord who asked about that, but certainly the noble and right reverend Lord, Lord Harries, did.

The noble Lord, Lord Alton, asked about discrimination against individuals on the basis of religion. We speak out in relation to specific incidents, and we

#### **26 Nov 2014 : Column GC316**

make it clear to Governments that longer-term structural change is required for religious toleration. Perhaps I may come back again to the point that we are continuing our engagement. One of the things we are certainly doing is engaging in terms of LGBT rights. I can vouch for that because when I was in India in March, it was one area that we were very concerned about. I can talk to the noble Lord afterwards about the Supreme Court decision, what happened, and why. We are very concerned that progress should continue to be made in this area.

In terms of what we are doing as we move on from grant aid, which was a small proportion of the contribution to India, although it was not insignificant, we are concentrating on technical support. Over the years, and not least in the time of the Labour Government, I have seen how technical support can transform what the Indian Government can access, particularly in terms of HIV/AIDS. We are working extremely hard to make sure that programmes that we have in place will be taken forward either by state or national Governments. Again, I can vouch for the work going into that.

We all recognise the huge potential of India. All noble Lords have expressed their recognition of this and their hope for the future, but all noble Lords also recognise the challenges that India faces in ensuring that, indeed, no one is left behind. We welcome Prime Minister Modi's statements and we look forward to our future partnership. It is in no one's interests for India to be other than a progressive and inclusive society.