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Caste discrimination — U.K. Dalits win the argument, nearly

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There's a palpable mood of optimism among Britain's 2,00,000-strong Dalit community as it waits for the Government to take a decision on its long-standing campaign for caste discrimination to be recognised as racism. The buzz is that, barring a last-minute hiccup, Britain could soon become the first European, indeed Western, country to declare caste prejudice unlawful under its race laws — a move which will not please New Delhi which has consistently opposed caste being clubbed with race.

Britain's new Equality Act already empowers the Government to declare “caste to be an aspect of race” without seeking fresh parliamentary approval.

Clause 9 of the Act says: “The fact that a racial group comprises two or more distinct racial groups does not prevent it from constituting a particular racial group. A Minister of the Crown may by order — (a) amend this section so as to provide for caste to be an aspect of race ...”

Much will depend on the findings of a study it has commissioned to determine the extent of caste discrimination. The report of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research, a leading independent research body which is conducting the research, is expected in the autumn and campaigners are confident that it will back their own claims about how “widespread” caste prejudice in Britain, really, is.

CasteWatchUK, Britain's oldest Dalit campaign group, says it is no longer a question of “if” but “when” an official announcement is made.

“We have provided enough evidence to researchers and have no doubt in our minds that their report will be positive. Besides, we have full faith in the fairness of the British state. The fact that they have included it in the equality act is half the battle won. It is not a question of ‘if’ but ‘when’ it happens,” claims its general secretary Davinder Prasad.

There has been widespread cross-party support for the campaign, the “only reluctant voices being those of Asian MPs,” according to Lekh Pall, general secretary of the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA), an umbrella group.

Leads to division

The issue has divided Britain's Indian diaspora and right-wing groups such as the Hindu Forum of Britain have launched a counter-campaign arguing that the Government has no right to intervene in what they claim is the community's internal affair.

Ramesh Kallidai, secretary-general of the Forum, says it is “not right for the U.K. Government to take a position on the rites, beliefs or practices of a particular religion”.

“Social interactions and personal choices are an expression of people's freedom, and any barriers should be removed through education and awareness, not through legislation,” he argues.

In a report, “Caste in the U.K.,” the Forum denied claims of caste discrimination saying its own research had found that it was “not endemic in British society”.

However, a study — “Hidden Apartheid, Voice of the Community, Caste and Caste Discrimination in the U.K.” — by ACDA in collaboration with academics from the universities of Hertfordshire and Manchester and the Manchester Metropolitan University, concluded that there was “clear evidence” of widespread caste-based discrimination.

“There is clear evidence from the survey and the focus groups that the caste system has been imported into the U.K. with the Asian diaspora and that the associated caste discrimination affects citizens in ways beyond personal choices and social interaction. There is a danger that if the U.K. government does not effectively accept and deal with the issue of caste discrimination the problem will grow unchecked,” it said.

The report claimed that “tens of thousands of people in the workplace, the classroom and even the doctor's surgery” suffered discrimination because of their caste. Forty-five per cent of the respondents alleged they had either been treated negatively by co-workers or had comments made about their caste. Nine per cent felt they were denied promotion, and 10 per cent that they were paid less because of their caste. Some also claimed that they faced “threats”.

One woman, who worked for an Indian-run radio station, complained that she was demoted after her manager discovered her caste background, while an elderly woman alleged that her care worker discriminated against her on caste grounds. One transport company reorganised its duty roster so that a “higher caste” inspector would not have to work with a “lower caste” bus driver. Caste-related name-calling was one of the most commonly-reported complaints.

More often than not, incidents of discrimination go unreported as people are reluctant to talk about them, activists claim with one activist saying that “there is a silent majority out there that we never hear about”.

According to Dr. Gurnam Singh of the department of social and community studies at Coventry University, caste discrimination is a “daily reality” for many. Yet there has been no “systematic” research about the level of caste prejudice in Britain. Anecdotal evidence, however, suggests that it is on the rise, he says.

Meanwhile, even as Dalits are preparing to celebrate what they hope would be a successful outcome of their long struggle there are also fears that the Government could develop “cold feet under pressure from New Delhi”, in the words of an ACDA official. And, if that happens they may take the issue to the European Court of Human Rights.

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