

**European Parliament hearing on Caste Discrimination in South Asia on 28th February
organised by the Sub-Committee on Human Rights the Committee on Development
Committee, the Delegation for relations with South Asia and the Delegation for relations with
India**

Presentation by Manjula Pradeep, Director, Navsarjan Trust, India

Respected Members of European Parliament,

I am Manjula Pradeep a human rights defender working for the rights of the Dalits, so called 'untouchables' and officially called 'Scheduled castes' in India. I have fought against discrimination my whole life, because of the caste I was born into.

Historically, caste discrimination is one of the oldest and the most inhuman forms of discrimination. More than 200 million people in India are vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence simply because of the caste into which they were born. The caste system subjects Dalits to segregation and abuse.

In India, when we are born, we are given a birth certificate which states our caste, this is where the discrimination starts and it follows you through childhood, school, marriage, work, it follows you everywhere. Children as young as 3 years old are being told that 'you are untouchable' and are forced to sit separately from other children.

As a Dalit in India you are treated as a non-human. The worst kinds of violence and discrimination are committed on the basis of caste including naked parading, rape of women to take revenge on Dalits that try to better their circumstances, murder and much more.

At the moment I am handling more than 45 cases of girls being raped because of caste discrimination. And every year I handle more than 25 cases of murder because of caste discrimination. Beyond humiliation, violence, murder and rape, Dalits are victims of widespread segregation. Segregation is witnessed in what is called 'untouchability practices' where, for example, Dalits are not allowed to use the same water source as non-dalits, eat from the same plate, sit in the same seats and so on. This includes Dalits being made to ride at the back of the bus and sit separately from the other children in schools. In this way, the caste system is very much like south Africa's apartheid regime in its consequences.

Studies in India furthermore indicate the imposition of new and modern forms of 'untouchability practices'. Last year, Navsarjan Trust, the organization where I have been working for 19 years, released its report titled "Understanding Untouchability" based on research in more than villages of Gujarat in the western part of India. 98 forms of untouchability practices were identified through interviews with caste-affected communities.

Although the Indian constitution abolishes untouchability and penalises the persons practising it, India is still rife with caste discrimination. Three laws have been enacted since India gained its independence including the Prevention of atrocities against Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes act. The provisions framed under an amendment to this act in 1995 lay down the setting up of Special courts, and Special Public Prosecutors. Special statutory bodies have been set up and a range of policy and budgetary measures have been put in place. But so far only a few states have been following the rules. Due to ineffective implementation of this law, thousands of cases of atrocities against Scheduled castes are pending in the criminal courts and the conviction rate according to official figures is 2.48%. The act has 22 sections, but

the majority of the police are unaware about these sections.

Reservation policies for “Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribes” in education, employment in the public sector and political representation are in force, but effectiveness in implementation has failed. Discrimination in employment and access to livelihood resources have resulted to extreme poverty amongst Dalit communities in India. 66 percent of India’s Dalits are poor – a proportion that is significantly higher than the poverty level of the average population. In eight Indian states alone there are more 'multidimensionally' poor people – about 421 million - than in the 26 poorest sub-Saharan countries in Africa combined.

In spite of its model legislation, violence and atrocities against Dalit are rampant and on the increase in India, effectively with impunity for perpetrators. The bottom line is that the Indian constitution is good. There are good anti-discrimination laws. But the level of impunity is incredibly high, law enforcement biased and implementation much too weak.

Dalits are also forced to perform tasks deemed too “polluting” or degrading for non-Dalits. According to unofficial estimates, as many as 1.3 million Indian Dalits are employed as manual scavengers to clear human waste from dry pit latrines, often with their bare hands and without protective gear.

The children of manual scavengers are particularly vulnerable to discrimination in their schools, where they are forced to perform cleaning and scavenging work, and where discrimination undermines all aspects of their education and often causes them to drop out of school altogether. Navsarjan undertook a survey that revealed how teachers, local governments and community members routinely subject the children of manual scavengers to discrimination and forced labour as part of their daily experience of attending school and living in their communities. While India has dramatically decreased the dropout rate for all Indian youth, the difference in dropout rates between Dalit and non-Dalit youth continues to widen. This survey has been provided to you together with Navsarjan’s groundbreaking report Understanding Untouchability as a briefing document. Both reports reveal rampant discrimination against Dalit children and students in direct contravention of numerous international and domestic laws banning caste discrimination and ‘untouchability’ practices.

Dalit women are also a particularly vulnerable group. There are more than 120 million women in South Asia who have been discriminated against and whose rights are violated based on caste and gender. Dalit women are have been subjected to forced prostitution, gang rape and other violence for more than 3000 years due to their gender and caste, and it must end now.

At Navsarjan we also work to empower Dalit women in their struggle against oppression and have also undertaken research into Dalit women and political participation. The right to equal political participation is a key concern for affected communities. In many instances, Dalits have either been denied political participation or, where provisions exist for Dalit political empowerment, they are left with limited influence. Threats and violence during election campaigns have occurred to prevent Dalits from voting or running for political office.

Caste discrimination and untouchability are unfortunately not just a problem in India – it has been documented in numerous other countries too. That is because Caste discrimination is not just about India, it is a global problem. Dalits across the globe need the support of the international community in their struggle for basic rights and dignity.

EU member states and institutions need to discuss that caste discrimination belongs on the agenda of the EU because India will not discuss this problem on an international arena until someone other than the Dalits brings it up. We need a more open and constructive dialogue for the sake of the Dalits but also for the sake of the India and the other affected countries.

It is not an issue of lacking documentation on caste discrimination and untouchability, there are hundreds of government reports, NGO reports and UN special rapporteurs and UN mechanisms have reported on this issue on numerous occasions. We have the documentation – what we need now is action.

I appreciate and thank the members of the European parliament for having shown support and solidarity to cause of eliminating caste discrimination in South Asia and in the world. We have been raising the issue of internationalizing and creating visibility to the rights of Dalits in the United Nations and in European Parliament since holding of the UN world conference against Racism and xenophobia and related intolerances in the year 2001 in Durban, South Africa.

We therefore reiterate our appeal to the European Parliament to take action towards recognition of caste based discrimination as a critical international human rights and developments issue and recommend action by the Council, the EAS, and member states to eliminate caste discrimination in South Asian region.

Thank you again for the support and solidarity.