

COVENTRY campaigners are calling for the government to include caste discrimination in their new Equality Bill.

The bill includes age, race and gender discrimination but the government claims caste discrimination does not exist in the UK.

Coventry's Dalits – the so-called lower castes – tell **Mary Griffin** why its time to stop sweeping prejudice under the carpet.

“THERE’S a higher caste lady who comes into my shop who refuses to take change from my hand,” says Reena Jaisiah.

“She won’t touch me. Even if the change isn’t small she’ll always tell me to put it in the charity box.”

Reena, 29, owns a shop in Hillfields with her husband Naj. Born in Britain with an Indian Punjabi background, Reena is Dalit, from the so-called lower castes.

Known as the “untouchables” because they are shunned by the rest of society, Dalits are literally outcasts whose ancestors were left out of the four-tier caste hierarchy.

In India, Nepal and Bangladesh campaigners have taken to the streets, marching for an end to caste discrimination which they claim bars the 250 million Dalits across South Asia from jobs, homes and a brighter future.

But closer to home, Coventry campaigners are hailing a warning that caste discrimination is not a foreign issue. City-based charity CasteWatch UK says caste inequality in Britain is rife, supported by prejudiced messages in school text books and even pop songs.

When Reena and her husband bought their Hillfields shop in 2004, she refused to discuss her caste with the Sikh seller.

“I refused to say when they asked what caste I was in case they changed their mind about selling us the shop.

“Afterwards, when I did tell them they were disgusted. I remember them saying, ‘But people like that work on my land in India!’”

As well as owning a shop, Reena is a supply teacher and claims she often sees caste prejudice in schools across the city.

“As a teacher,” she says, “I’m frequently asked what religion and what caste I am.

“The children don’t mean to be offensive – they are only asking questions that have been put into their heads by their parents. But caste discrimination is alive and kicking in schools and it can occur through lessons, particularly in religion and history – wherever caste is presented in the curriculum as a hierarchy.”

Reena studied for a sociology degree before doing a Masters specialising in caste discrimination in the UK.

As part of her research she interviewed Dalits and found the victims and perpetrators of caste inequality were extremely reluctant to speak out.

“People don’t talk about it. They brush it under the carpet,” she says.

“I think it’s because they feel ashamed of it.”

Reena launched Coventry theatre group Caste Away Arts to tackle social stigmas including caste through drama.

She used her Masters research to write a play on the topic, which the group performed in Birmingham in 2007.

“When we did the play for the first time,” she recalls, “we got death threats from a Sikh terrorist group.

“We had extra security at the



TOUGH LIFE:
Struggling Dalits in Bangladesh

theatre, with undercover police in the audience.

“But the play looked at caste discrimination from the point of view of higher castes picking on untouchables and the other way round.

“When people realised what it was about it was very well received.

“Caste discrimination is not just about higher castes being prejudiced towards lower castes, it is about making assumptions because of someone’s caste.

Former Coventry Lord Mayor Ram Lakha is from a Dalit or

untouchable background, belonging to a caste of cobblers and leather workers.

Coun Lakha, who represents Binley and Willenhall, declined to speak about his personal experience, but spoke more generally about caste inequality, saying he fully supports religious and cultural freedom as long as it doesn’t lead to inequality.

“Yes, caste discrimination is an issue in the Indian and South Asian community,” he said.

“It means people are not just from an Indian minority but are further marginalised within that minority.

“No member of my family was involved in work related to cobblers or leather but still, that is the way we are treated in India and even here.

“It’s already ingrained in Britain. It’s part of the thinking.

“Some of the younger generation that are coming through have been brainwashed by their parents.

“They are singing Punjabi folk songs that are full of what I see as caste filth, saying: ‘We are Jat [a higher caste]’.

“This is sending the wrong message – that one group is superior to others.

“That’s not the reality and it undermines everybody else’s position and that filth is still influencing here.”

Coun Lakha’s father helped to construct Coventry’s first purpose-

built Sikh temple in Harnall Lane. But as the Sikh community developed, more temples were built to accommodate different castes in the city.

Coventry now has eight Sikh temples which Coun Lakha

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believes are split, not on geographical areas or religious grounds, but on caste differences.

Five years ago Davinder Prasad helped set up Coventry-based CasteWatchUK to publicise the problem of caste discrimination in

Britain and fight to change both the law and attitudes.

The registered charity claims South Asian immigrants brought caste discrimination to the UK, and say it has now become an accepted part of life for the estimated 50,000 Dalits in Britain.

Mr Prasad, who came to Britain from Delhi 20 years ago, said: “I thought I had left all that behind. But caste is a very sensitive and complex issue. It is something which badly affects community cohesion.

“To develop a career in this country as an Indian is quite hard, but when you’re untouchable it’s twice as hard. You will not find one person who will publicly come out and say they practise caste discrimination, and the victims are too ashamed to come forward. But in private we all know it’s going on.”

CasteWatch UK is part of a

national campaign rallying the government to include caste discrimination in the new Equality Bill expected to be given royal assent later this year.

“Racial discrimination is frowned on because there’s a law against it,” says Mr Prasad.

“But in Britain as the law currently stands, a dog fouling the street is more important than a kid being bullied because of their caste in school or a person losing their job because of caste prejudice.

“I don’t want my children to go to school and have their teacher tell them they are inferior lower caste and polluting society.

“This is not acceptable to me. It’s a clear violation of my human rights and the human rights of my children.

“Children need to be told, ‘You’ve been taught nonsense for the last 60 years! These things are now obsolete.’”



UNACCEPTABLE:
Davinder Prasad – head of CasteWatch UK – and former Coventry Lord Mayor Ram Lakha.



THE CASTE system is traditionally associated with the Hindu religion, but the International Dalit Solidarity Network says caste discrimination is a social rather than a religious issue.

The main castes - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras - are determined by birth and may influence a person’s status, occupation and marriage. But the Dalits fall outside this system, causing them to be labelled as being “beneath” the four-tier hierarchy. Even among the Dalits there are around 45 sub-castes, further complicating status and boundaries.

And caste discrimination extends beyond south Asia. CasteWatchUK claims the system still has a powerful influence over the lives of millions of Britons of south-Asian origin.

FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION:
Reena Jaisiah who set up her own theatre company called Caste Away Arts to tackle social stigmas including the problem of the caste system.



CASTE OUT

The shocking truth about how age-old tradition leads to people like Reena being openly treated like dirt...

PROTEST: Campaigners from Coventry’s CasteWatch UK make their feelings known outside Parliament last month



FACTFILE

THE ARGUMENT AGAINST LEGISLATION

THE current Equality Bill going through parliament doesn’t include any legislation on the caste system.

When asked why caste wasn’t included, Baroness Andrews, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Department for Communities and Local Government said: “There is insufficient evidence that caste discrimination is a significant problem in Great Britain in the specific fields that discrimination law covers: namely, in employment; vocational training; the provision of goods, facilities and services; private clubs; the management or disposal of premises; education; and the exercise of public functions.

“The Government are keeping the matter under review and my officials will shortly be meeting representatives of organisations with an interest.”

Tomorrow campaigners fighting caste discrimination will meet members of the Bill Committee in the House of Lords to persuade them to include caste in the new Equality Bill.

The committee will hear testimonials from victims who have suffered caste discrimination in the workplace and one couple who say a temple refused to host their wedding because of their caste.

Further evidence comes in a recently released report by the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA) which surveyed 300 people and found more than half of those from traditionally lower-caste backgrounds have been victims of prejudice and abuse.

The study found caste discrimination in employment, in schools and even in the doctor’s surgery.

WHAT IS CASTE?

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