

European Parliament Subcommittee on Human Rights Public Hearing on Caste Discrimination in South Asia

Report by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) – April 2026



Introduction

On 14 April 2026, the European Parliament's Subcommittee on Human Rights held a public hearing on caste discrimination in South Asia. The hearing brought together Members of the European Parliament, the European External Action Service, civil society and affected communities to discuss caste discrimination as a structural human rights issue and to explore the role of the European Union in responding to it more effectively.

The hearing was chaired by MEP Mounir Satouri, Chair of the Subcommittee on Human Rights. The invited speakers were Ashwini K.P., UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance; Sandra Claassen, Director of Arisa; Purbhu Satyani, representing the International Dalit Solidarity Network; and Michal Pesta, Acting Head of Division for South Asia, Asia and Pacific Department, European External Action Service.

The hearing provided an important platform for discussion of caste discrimination as a continuing and serious human rights concern affecting millions of people in South Asia and beyond, including in diaspora contexts. It also highlighted the need for stronger and more explicit EU engagement through political dialogue, trade and partnership mechanisms, development cooperation, and business and human rights frameworks.

Overview of the hearing

A central theme across the hearing was that caste discrimination remains insufficiently recognised internationally despite its depth, persistence, and impact. Speakers consistently challenged the notion that caste is merely a cultural or local issue. Instead, they presented it as a structural system of exclusion that shapes access to justice, education, employment, land, health, public services and dignity.

The discussion also stressed that caste discrimination must be approached in an intersectional way, taking into account how caste interacts with gender, poverty, labour exploitation, minority status, and other forms of marginalization. The hearing therefore offered not only insights into the problem, but also a number of concrete recommendations for EU institutions and member states.

Key Interventions

Ashwini K.P.: Caste discrimination as structural and intersectional oppression



In her intervention, UN Special Rapporteur, Ashwini K.P. framed caste-based discrimination as an enduring and insufficiently acknowledged structural form of discrimination prohibited under international human rights law. She emphasised that the issue extends beyond South Asia and is also present in diaspora communities.

She stressed the need to address caste through an intersectional lens, explaining that multiple forms of discrimination often overlap and reinforce one another. In particular, she highlighted the situation of Dalit women, whose experiences cannot be understood through a single-axis approach.

“For Dalit women, discrimination is not experienced as two separate issues: Caste on one hand and gender on the other.”

— Ashwini K.P., UN Special Rapporteur

Ashwini K.P. called for explicit legal recognition of caste as a protected ground under anti-discrimination law, stronger access to justice, improved disaggregated data collection and survivor-centred approaches that place affected communities at the centre of responses. She also highlighted the importance of EU engagement in this area.

“It is the need of the hour to explicitly and legally recognize caste as a protected ground under all forms of anti-discrimination law in regional and national frameworks, including the international human rights framework.”

— Ashwini K.P., UN Special Rapporteur

Pirbhu Satyani: Pakistan and the lived realities of caste-affected communities



Pirbhu Satyani provided testimony focused on Pakistan and the daily realities faced by caste-affected and minority communities. He described caste discrimination as a global human rights issue that remains largely invisible despite affecting millions of people across South Asia and beyond.

His intervention highlighted systematic discrimination in education, employment, land ownership, political participation and access to justice. He drew particular attention to bonded labour, child labour, hazardous sanitation work and the forced conversion of minority and Dalit girls. He also noted that many affected communities remain landless, poor, and socially excluded and that legislative developments in Pakistan have not yet translated into meaningful change at grassroots level.

“Pakistan needs to criminalize caste-based discrimination and enforce laws to prevent forced religious conversion and forced marriages.”

— **Pirbhu Satyani, International Dalit Solidarity Network**

Satyani called for stronger implementation of existing laws, inclusive education, district-level coordination, stronger protection for girls, and development measures for landless and marginalized communities. At EU level, he recommended clearer attention to caste discrimination within GSP+ monitoring, human rights dialogue, research support and partnerships with civil society and affected communities.

Sandra Claassen: Caste discrimination in supply chains



Sandra Claassen focused on caste discrimination in supply chains in South Asia and its implications for European companies and policymakers. She made clear that caste discrimination is not a peripheral issue, but one that directly affects European business conduct and responsible sourcing.

Drawing on Arisa’s research in sectors such as garments, leather, natural stone and vegetable seeds, she described how caste shapes recruitment, working conditions, segregation, exclusion from training and promotion and concentration in the most dangerous and least secure jobs. Her intervention also linked caste discrimination to broader labour rights violations, including forced labour and severe exploitation.

“It’s a serious business and human rights risk for European companies sourcing from countries in South Asia such as India, Bangladesh and Pakistan.”

— **Sandra Claassen, Director of Arisa**

Claassen stressed that audits focused only on wages, working hours, or contracts may fail to identify the structural causes of labour exploitation where caste is not explicitly considered. She also underlined the responsibility of European companies to look for caste-based harms in their sourcing relationships.

“European companies are not distant bystanders.”

— **Sandra Claassen, Director of Arisa**

In response to questions from Members of the European Parliament, she further argued that EU human rights due diligence legislation and implementation processes should explicitly recognise caste-based discrimination as a foreseeable and relevant risk in South Asian supply chains.

Michal Pesta: EU positioning and engagement



Speaking on behalf of the EEAS, Michal Pesta reaffirmed that non-discrimination and respect for the rights of persons belonging to minorities are core values of the European Union. He referred to the European Parliament’s longstanding attention to caste discrimination, including its 2013 resolution and annual human rights reporting.

Pesta acknowledged that caste-based discrimination is a complex and deep-rooted issue affecting access to public services, labour rights, social inclusion, and broader questions of implementation and enforcement. He also noted that discrimination based on work and descent is not confined to South Asia and linked it to discrimination faced by Roma communities in Europe.

“Discrimination based on work and descent is at its core a denial of the most basic human dignity... The principle is not a Western value or European value. It’s a universal one”

— Michal Pesta, European External Action Service

He highlighted the role of EU delegations, government dialogue, civil society engagement and funding noting that projects in South Asia are already addressing minority discrimination, including in Nepal and Pakistan.

Discussion with Members of the European Parliament

The exchange with Members of the European Parliament showed significant political interest in the issue. Questions raised by MEPs focused on several themes: the persistence of caste discrimination beyond India, especially in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and Nepal; the relationship between caste discrimination and colonial legacies; the impact of caste discrimination on children and the relevance of children’s rights instruments; the role of trade conditionality, development cooperation and supply chain oversight; and the possible role of other influential actors in Asia.

One MEP described caste-based discrimination as “a sort of apartheid”, while another observed that caste remains too often invisible internationally and is still frequently treated as a cultural issue instead of being condemned as strongly as racism or sexism. These interventions reflected a growing recognition that caste deserves a more central place in EU human rights and external relations discussions.



Main Outcomes

The hearing demonstrated growing recognition within the European Parliament that caste discrimination is a serious and structural human rights issue requiring more explicit and sustained EU action. Several important points emerged from the discussion.

First, there was a strong emphasis on the need to recognise caste discrimination as structural and intersectional, especially in relation to Dalit women and communities facing multiple and overlapping forms of exclusion.

Second, the hearing highlighted the importance of addressing caste within business and human rights frameworks, including due diligence legislation, forced labour oversight and supply chain transparency.

Third, the hearing created useful space for discussing caste discrimination in Pakistan, including issues that often receive inadequate international attention, such as bonded labour, sanitation work, discrimination at school and forced conversion of minority girls.

Fourth, the intervention from the EEAS suggested that there is scope for further engagement through EU delegations, human rights dialogues, funding programmes and continued cooperation with civil society and affected communities.

For IDSN, the hearing was an important advocacy opportunity. It reinforced the need to continue pressing EU institutions to address caste discrimination explicitly in human rights dialogue, GSP+ monitoring, development cooperation and corporate accountability processes, while ensuring that affected communities remain central to these efforts.

Conclusion

In his concluding remarks, Mounir Satouri stressed that the European Parliament should continue integrating caste discrimination into the work of its various bodies, engage with civil society and affected communities during missions abroad and raise the issue systematically with local authorities. He also stated that the conclusions of the hearing would be shared with other relevant parliamentary bodies and followed up with other European institutions.

Overall, the hearing marked an important step in strengthening recognition within the European Parliament that caste discrimination is not a marginal or purely cultural issue, but a serious human rights, equality and labour issue requiring targeted and sustained EU action. It also showed that there is political interest in pursuing this issue further, and that IDSN's continued engagement with EU institutions remains both timely and necessary.

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