

Report from the February 2011 EP hearing on caste-based discrimination in South Asia

The hearing took place on February 28, 2011 and was organised as a joint hearing by the Subcommittee on Human Rights, Committee on Development, Delegation for relations with India and the Delegation for relations with South Asia. [See the programme here >>](#)

The aims of the hearing were:

- To raise the awareness of MEPs about caste-based discrimination as a violation of basic human rights, and an issue to raise during inter-parliamentary meetings or delegations.
- To promote concerted actions at UN and EU level that could contribute to policy measures for the elimination of caste discrimination.

Speakers:

Ms Rikke Nöhrind, Coordinator, International Dalit Solidarity Network

Ms Manjula Pradeep, Executive Director of Navsarjan Trust

Mr Antti Korkeakivi, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Chief, Indigenous Peoples and Minorities Section

Ms Maria Lensu, EEAS, Directorate Human Rights and Democratization

Chairs:

Mr Nirj Deva, Committee on Development, MEP – UK (European Conservatives and Reformists)

Mr Niccoló Rinaldi, Delegation for relations with South Asia, MEP – Italy (Group of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe)

Ms Heidi Hautala, Subcommittee on Human Rights, MEP – Finland (Group of the Greens/European Free Alliance)

Ms Lena Kolarska-Bobinska, Delegation for relations with India, MEP – Poland (Group of the European People's Party (Christian Democrats))

Releases

Read the IDSN [press release](#) 'MEPs: The EU must act now to help end one of the biggest human rights issues in the world' on the hearing (issued on the 1 March 2011)

Read the IDSN/DSN-UK/DNN [opinion piece](#) 'Lots of Sympathy, too little action' released prior to the hearing

Note: Unfortunately because of the previous session running late and the subsequent session starting early the speakers and chairs were not given the full time allotted to them to speak. This also meant that only one MEP was allowed to comment despite others wishing to comment.

Introduction by Ms Heidi Hautala, Subcommittee on Human Rights

Ms Hautala said that caste based discrimination is a very severe form of human rights violation – that deserves our indivisible attention.

Opening statements by Mr Nirj Deva, Committee on Development

Mr Deva stressed the importance of the hearing taking place commenting that too little had been done to address caste-based discrimination through the EU. "I consider caste based discrimination one of the largest and most serious human rights violations in the world," he said and offered an explanation of what the consequences of caste discrimination are. As he read through the list of segregation, rape, murder, modern slavery, cleaning human excrements by hand, discrimination in access to basic services, education, health, he stopped himself and said that he could not read any more because it was simply too disgusting. He explained how Dalits are told that they must fulfill their role as 'untouchables' because they are paying for sins in a previous life. "I'm sure that everyone in this room will agree that if someone had cooked up the theory that we had to have slavery because the slaves are paying for sins in their previous life, that would not have washed. The same applies to caste discrimination and we have to do something in cooperation with South Asian countries to stop this," he commented. He also gave an example from his own and Mr. Rinaldi's recent visit to Sri Lanka where they experienced that a house owner washed the pavement in front of their house because a Dalit had walked there. He also referred to the Human Rights Watch report on caste discrimination entitled 'Hidden Apartheid'.

Statements by Mr. Niccoló Rinaldi, Delegation for relations with South Asia

Mr. Rinaldi commented on the complexities of the issue of caste discrimination saying that the caste system is potentially extremely difficult for the development of society and compared and contrasted it to racism in Europe. He said that to be fair, laws are there, constitutional provision are there in India, but it is also true that quotas are not fulfilled and Brahmins fill 70% of political posts despite being only 5% of the population.

Presentation by Ms Rikke Nöhrliind

[Please read the full presentation here >>](#)

Presentation by Manjula Pradeep

[Please read the full presentation here >>](#)

Statements by Ms Lena Kolarska-Bobinska

Ms Kolarska-Bobinska commented that the caste system is in a constant process of self-reproduction – because of the inheritance factor. She felt there should be a monitor – like the Eurobarometer - to follow the mindsets in the region.

Mr Antti Korkeakivi, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Chief, Indigenous Peoples and Minorities Section

Mr Korkeakivi commented that CBD is a deep-rooted problem with severe human rights consequences affecting 260 million people globally that the High Commissioner is very concerned about. In the OHCHR strategic management plan for South Asia they work with a particular focus on women and caste he added. He underlined the importance of initiatives that have been launched in various countries in South Asia to make sure that their legal guarantees against caste based discrimination are truly felt at the local level. In this work, institutions such as the National Dalit Commission in Nepal and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes in India have an important role to play. He explained OHCHR-Nepal's work and the UNs Voluntary Trust Fund on Contemporary Forms of Slavery – available to NGO

projects to support victims and potential victims of contemporary forms of slavery, who in a number of cases come from Dalit and other communities that are exposed to caste-based discrimination. He also commented on Special Procedures – visits of the special rapporteurs – to India, Bangladesh etc. [Read the full speech here >>](#) (although due to time constraints it was not fully delivered).

Ms Maria Lensu, EEAS, Directorate Human Rights and

Ms Lensu commented that in the context of EU – India relations there is the EU-India dialogue, used to raise where appropriate, human rights issues. She also mentioned the EU-India seminar, regional workshop in Bangladesh in June 2009, 11th February 2011 – workshop to promote socially inclusive societies. She explained that the EU has programmes particularly focusing on Dalits and listed EU funding for Dalit projects and organisations. [The full list can be found here >>](#)

Comment by Peter van Dalen, MEP – Netherlands (European Conservatives and Reformists)

Peter van Dalen commented that the Parliament needs to take a much more robust stand. Enough words – it's time for action. We must take action through our external action service – they need to make caste discrimination a priority. We are concluding a free trade agreement with India and we must include a clause on caste discrimination.

Closing statement by Ms. Kolarska-Bobinska

Ms. Kolarska-Bobinska closed the hearing by stating that this was the first of several meetings in the parliaments on the topic of caste discrimination and that the next meeting should focus on what action the EP and Parliamentarians should now take.

[The full hearing can be viewed here >>](#)

Related Documents:

[Draft UN Principles and Guidelines on Discrimination Based on Work and Descent](#)

[IDSN Policy Recommendations for the EU](#)

[EP Resolution on Human Rights of the Dalits in India \(2007\)](#)

[EP Resolution on an EU-India Free Trade Agreement \(2009\)](#)

[IDSN study on caste-based discrimination in South Asia \(commissioned by the European Commission\)](#)

[IDSN's letter to EU High Representative, Catherine Ashton, urging action on caste discrimination](#)

Cases:

[Dalit Children in India – Victims of Caste Discrimination](#)

Contacts:

[DROI Committee member list](#)

[India delegation member list](#)

[South Asia delegation member list](#)

[Development committee member list](#)