Casting lines for a better future

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

PROTEST: Campaigns from Coventry’s CankuWuk UK make their feelings known outside Parliament last month

UNACCOUNTABLE: Unknown Provuch – head of Coventry’s CankuWuk UK – and Coventry Mayor Coun Ray Lakhani

FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION: Reena Raval who set up the Coventry CankuWuk UK in response to recent social stigma to challenge the problem of caste discrimination in the city. Coventry CankuWuk UK is part of a national campaign calling the government to include caste discrimination in the 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 says why don’t you change your name to a name she wants,” says Reena Raval.

“I said fine, if the change isn’t good for you then I won’t,” she says.

Reena, 20, owns a shop in Hillfield with her husband Nav. Born in Britain with a Indian origin, Reena and Nav have been married for five years and have two children.

Reena’s family lives in a small suburban town of in Surat in India and is a part of the Khatiya community – one of the lower caste communities in India.

Khatias are known as the ‘untouchables’ because they are shunned by the rest of society. Dalits are literally untouchable because their hands were left out of the caste system.

In India, Rahul and Bhavik Patel campaigns were taken to the streets, marching he and his co-caste discrimination which they claim has the 280 million Dalits across South Asia from jobs, housing and education.

But in Britain, Indian communities are facing growing social stigma that is not a foreign issue. City-based charity CankuWuk UK says caste (prejudice in India is rife, supported by perceived messages in school which links caste with crime and poverty.

So how did it all start?

It was 2009 when Reena and Nav bought their Hillfield shop, in 2006, she refused to discuss anything with her caste colleagues.

“I refused to ever think about it, I was not going to change their mind at all,” she says.

“Afterwards, when I said I was going to refuse, I remember speaking to them like that on my mind,” she adds.

As well as meeting shops, Reena has now castes prejudice in schools across the city.

“It is a battle,” she says. “I frequently asked what religion and what caste I am.

“The children don’t want to be offensive – they are only asking questions,” she says. “We have to explain that their heads do this, their parents.”

But discrimination is alive and kicking in schools and it does not occur through ignorance, prejudice, racism and violence.

“People don’t talk about it,” she says.

“There is no need to be scared, but they feel like they feel targeted.”

Reena launched Coventry CankuWuk UK after leaving a meeting with members of the community.

She used her 14 months research to write a play on the topic, which the West Gate School in Hillfield agreed to perform.

“We did it for the kids,” she recalls, “We got the kids to talk about their views.”

“We had extra security at the shows, with uniformed police in the audience.”

“Where the play looked at caste discrimination, it covered the price of view of higher castes picking on lower castes and the other way around.

“People realised what it was all about,” she said. “We were very well received.”

“Until we don’t discuss it, it is not just about higher castes being prejudiced towards lower castes, it is about making sense and awareness of boundaries.”

Coun Ray Lakhani, who leads Coventry City Council from a BNP background, backs Reena’s cause.

“No member of my family was involved in such actions that we call it a social stigma. We are not involved in such actions. We are treated in India and even here.”

“Every day you hear it in the media. It’s a generalisation of the caste system.”

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.

He believes such action is not just geographical or social stigma, but also caste differences.

Five years and 200 miles since Reena Raval helped to start Coventry’s first purpose-built Bihik temple in Harrow Lane. But in the Bihik community, Reena and Nav have been targeted for not being able to access different castes in the city.

Coventry now has eight Bihik temples which house Lalitha.

“Until Britain is as low community stands, a dog fouling the street is more important than a kid being bullied because of their caste job because of caste prejudice. We don’t want our children to go to school and have their teacher tell them they are inferior lower caste.

“This is is not acceptable to us. It is severe violation of my human rights and the human rights of my children.

We need to end this. You’ve been bought innocent of the last decade or so.”

Coun Ray Lakhani, Coventry Mayor from BNP background, supports Reena’s campaign to see caste discrimination is not just geographical but social stigma.

Fighting for their children’s rights, Reena believes the problem of caste discrimination in the UK is as significant as that in India.

They have now written to the government and the Home Office about the problem of caste discrimination in the UK.

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