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High-caste Indians find low-caste cooks hard to swallow

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A plan in northern India to bridge social divisions by employing members of the lowest caste as cooks in government schools has led to hundreds of upper-caste pupils being pulled out of schools and outbreaks of violence by angry parents.

The scheme was part of an ambitious drive by the Uttar Pradesh chief minister, Mayawati, to empower the dalit caste. Dalits, often referred to as "untouchables", are considered the lowest in the Hindu caste hierarchy. But human rights groups have said resistance to the plan shows how deeply embedded and discriminatory the caste system remains in modern India.

The resistance against the dalit cooks by the upper-caste Hindus turned so fierce in recent weeks that villagers attacked teachers and the dalit cooks in some schools and fought pitched battles with police.

Ms Mayawati, who was born into a dalit family, ordered the appointment of hundreds of dalits to prepare meals for children in the state's government schools in April.

In Hindu society, only upper-caste Hindu cooks are allowed to cook community meals.

Trouble started on July 1 when dozens of female dalit cooks were sent by the education department to start working in village schools where the majority of pupils were upper-caste Hindus.

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At one primary school in Mairakhpur village in Ramabai Nagar district, the pupils refused to eat the meal prepared by the new dalit cook. Last week more than 300 villagers, both men and women, armed with wooden and iron bars and stones attacked the school. The angry villagers locked the kitchen, ransacked the school and held the teachers and the dalit cook captive in a room for hours until police arrived and rescued them.

In another school in Kannauj district, after pupils were forced to eat the meals by general administration and education officials, furious upper-caste villagers beat up the officials and set their vehicles on fire, according to ETV.

Sanjay Shukla, an Uttar Pradesh education official, said last week that legal action would be initiated against the villagers for disrupting the functioning of government schools and that the dalit cooks would not be removed. Sources inside the education department, however, told local media that further district appointments of dalit cooks had been put on hold.

Regional television channels reported this week that more than 1,500 upper-caste Hindu pupils had been pulled out of government schools by their parents in villages in Ramabai Nagar, Kannauj, Kanpur Dehat, Allahabad, Auraiya, Etawah and other districts.

"They are trying to force our children to eat food cooked by untouchable dalit. It's like forcing a Muslim to eat pork. It's totally against our culture," said Veeru Dubey, an angry villager in Ramabai Nagar district, where the recent appointment of three dalit cooks in two schools sparked protests. "They did not accept our demand to replace dalit cooks with upper-caste ones and so we decided to withdraw our children from the school."

Rights groups said this type of reaction demonstrated the difficulty they face in eradicating the caste system.

"This is nothing but a rabid form of untouchability being imposed against employments of dalit cooks," said Paul Divakar, a convener of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights. "Though this practice has been abolished in the constitution, the hidden apartheid is continuing in several contemporary forms."

In 2007, Ms Mayawati vowed to lift the social position of Uttar Pradesh's dalits, who make up about one-fifth of the state's population.

According to the latest Uttar Pradesh education department rule, instituted this month, a school with 25 pupils should have one dalit woman appointed as the cook. For a school with up to 100 students one dalit and one non-dalit cook should be appointed. A school with more than 100 pupils would have a third lower-caste cook.

For Shanthi, one of the dalit cooks from Ramabai Nagar, the scheme that had once seemed like an opportunity has left her embarrassed and disappointed.

"I asked a 10-year-old child in our school why he would not eat kheer [milk pudding] cooked by me when I had cooked it with

utmost care. He replied that his parents had asked him not to eat anything cooked by me because I was dalit," Shanthi, 38, said.

"I felt devastated when I found that the little boy even felt uncomfortable when I touched him. I am sure that the child was taught by his parents that he should not even get in physical touch with a dalit. I was reminded again in a painful way that I am an 'untouchable'."

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