

MISERY OF THE UNTOUCHABLES

TODAY a Coventry campaign group is urging the government to recognise that thousands of British Asians face discrimination because of their caste.

Yesterday we looked at caste prejudice in Coventry. Here **MARY GRIFFIN** investigates caste discrimination in Bangladesh.

A HIGH brick wall runs along a busy Dhaka street where rickshaws and fruit carts dodge potholes and pedestrians.

Behind the wall lies Gonoktoli, a community of 4,000 Dalit people living in a cramped network of squat rooms and blocks of flats.

Kakoli Rani Das, 17, is surrounded by a throng of eager five-year-olds in a bedroom which during the day becomes a school room.

"I did well in my exams," she says, "so I filled out a form and took it to the ward commissioner to ask for a scholarship.

"But when he saw me he said, 'I won't sign this. You are a Dalit girl. You are not fit for higher education'.

"I begged him but he refused, ripped it up and threw it away."

As a Dalit, Kakoli inhabits one of the capital's 27 so-called "colonies", reserved for the men and women destined to do Dhaka's dirtiest jobs.

These people, whose ancestors were left out of the four-tier Hindu caste hierarchy, are literally outcasts.

Known as "untouchables" because they are shunned by the rest of society, and labelled Harijan (children of God) by Gandhi, they have adopted the name Dalit, from the Sanskrit for "downtrodden".

Distinguished by their names, sari style, language and accents, Dalits are assigned the jobs nobody else wants, including sweeping the streets, burying the dead and manual scavenging (cleaning human excrement from dry toilets by hand).

Bangladesh's estimated five million Dalits are among 250 million across south Asia, who risk being refused entry to temples, restaurants and schools for fear they will contaminate the higher castes.

The Dalits of Dhaka are not only a caste minority but a religious minority in a predominantly Muslim country.

While the caste system originates in Hindu scriptures, there are an unknown number of Christian Dalits in Bangladesh, and the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) claims the practice of discriminating against Dalits has also been adopted by the country's Muslim majority, making caste

prejudice not a religious but a social issue.

And in a nation of Bangla speakers, the Dalits' Hindu and Telugu mother tongues makes access to education, housing, the justice system and the political arena more of a struggle.

In neighbouring India a successful civil rights movement has gained representation for the country's Dalits, but in Bangladesh Dalits are yet to break into the political arena.

But Kakoli belongs to a new wave of young Dalits in Bangladesh who are swimming against the tide to finish school and become role-models in their communities.

In this makeshift classroom 17-year-olds teach the youngsters Bangla so they can start primary school with a fighting chance.

According to Dr Iftekhar Chowdhury, sociology professor at the University of Chittagong, before the 1940s large numbers of lower caste people were lured to

Bangladesh (formerly Bengal) on the promise of a better life.

He said: "According to the case history of their old leaders, they were persuaded through different municipality agents who offered them permanent employment with good wages, free housing, medical care, et cetera. But after their arrival in Bangladesh, they were segregated in separate colonies.

"They have been gradually given mental pressure and become accustomed to do the menial jobs."

Touring Dhaka's colonies most of the people we meet have no washrooms and some women are forced to bathe fully clothed on a riverbank, 200 yards from a pipe spewing sewage.

Street sweepers and cleaners tell us they are paid less and forced to work longer than their colleagues, just because they are Dalit.

Parents say they try to disguise their Dalit identity when taking their children to hospital for fear they will be treated last.

And women tell us they are too scared to go to their nearest water pump because of physical attacks on Dalits.

Mopping her brow in the midday heat, 68-year-old Urwasi Ful Baseya Rani says: "The British government said 'We'll give you houses, jobs, money and opportunities'.

They promoted it with an advertising campaign. That's why my parents wanted to come here.

"But when they arrived it was

different. They were treated very badly."

Seventy years ago, Urwasi's newlywed parents made the 600-mile journey from Uttar Pradesh to a new life, new jobs and a new home in Dhaka.

But when they arrived they were forced to live apart from other citizens in Old Dhaka's Nazirabazar colony and given jobs as sweepers.

After 50 years of sweeping the city's streets – and with no

pension – Urwasi lives in the eight foot by eight foot room where she was born.

Hunched over a bed of wooden planks the 68-year-old remembers her late parents – farmers of the Dom subcaste – speaking about their fate.

"When they arrived and didn't find what they were promised," she says, "my mother and father were very disappointed, but they were helpless.

"They couldn't go back to the

country so they were forced to live here and do this kind of work.

"They felt that this was their fortune; this was their fate."

Urwasi claims her family were already marginalised as Dalits in India but were further isolated and excluded in Bangladesh.

She said: "The British Government should apologise for what they did.

"They tricked us and broke their promise."



SEGREGATED: Urwasi Rani says her parents moved to Bangladesh with the promise of a new life – instead they were forced to live apart from the rest of the population in squalid conditions.

FROM BRITAIN TO BANGLADESH

OUR environment reporter Mary Griffin travelled to Bangladesh late last year as a finalist in the Guardian's International Development Journalism Competition. Teamed with the London-based charity One World Action – one of only a handful of aid agencies working with Dalits – she spent a week touring Dhaka's "sweeper" colonies and slums.



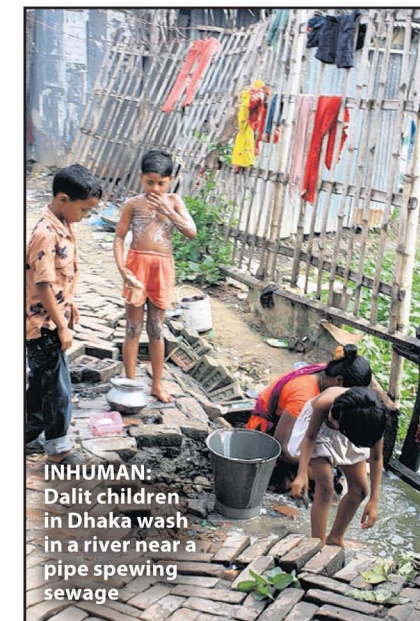
TIME TO TACKLE THE PROBLEMS OF PAST AND PRESENT

BANGLADESH Dalit Human Rights is a group seeking to lead a civil rights movement to fight caste discrimination.

They have called on the British government to admit responsibility for leaving already vulnerable lower-caste people isolated in Dhaka's colonies, claiming that this is the last chance for the few remaining original migrants to hear an apology.

Their president, Solomon Bothannki, said: "Dalits were promised good jobs, houses, security and a better life in Bangladesh.

"However for generations they have faced extreme discrimination and inequality, and continue to face extreme poverty, exclusion from land, health and education and daily untouchability and violence.



INHUMAN: Dalit children in Dhaka wash in a river near a pipe spewing sewage

"The memory and pain of these broken promises is still fresh for the few remaining migrants from the 1940s living in Dhaka's Dalit colonies."

But a written response from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office states: "It is unfortunate that Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights are of the view that the UK is responsible for the situation of Dalits in Bangladesh.

"UK aid to Bangladesh this year totals £126 million.

"A large proportion of this money is spent on the most vulnerable and excluded groups in Bangladesh, including Dalits."

Now Dalits in the UK are also embroiled in a battle for recognition from the British government.

The Equality Office has included gender, age and race discrimination in its new Equality Bill, but has refused calls to add caste discrimination, claiming it does not exist in the UK.

Today Coventry campaign group CasteWatchUK is asking the House of Lords to review the decision, claiming caste discrimination is alive and kicking not just in Bangladesh but in Britain.