



DALIT SOLIDARITY NETWORK UK

Director: Meena Varma

Thomas Clarkson House, The Stableyard, Broomgrove Road, London SW9 9TL
Tel: +44 (0)20 7501 8323 **Email:** meena.v@dsnuk.org www.dsnuk.org

Registered Charity Number 1107022

Will the UK Government finally agree to legislate against caste discrimination in the Equality Bill?

The UK government has a unique opportunity to ensure the rights of over 250,000 of its citizens – part of the Asian diaspora and also from the Dalit (formerly known as untouchables) community. In education, in employment and in the provision of goods and services, our Dalit people still suffer from discrimination. We urge the UK government to include caste in the Equality Bill.

On February 4 2010, an historic and unprecedented meeting took place at the House of Lords at the invitation of Baroness Thornton. Lords Avebury, Harries and Lester as well as Baroness Northover were all present in support of the caste amendment.

Over 20 national and community Dalit organisations representing over one million people in the UK, came together with one voice and called on the Government to outlaw Caste Discrimination in the same way as other forms of discrimination. Caste discrimination provisions were not in the original draft of the bill, and Hindu leaders had claimed that caste discrimination was not a problem in Britain despite substantial evidence to the contrary. We now hope that the Government will table an amendment to include Caste (as a subset of Race) at the Report Stage of the Equality Bill to protect victims or potential victims of Caste Discrimination in the UK.

As a result of this meeting, the UK Government seem to be edging ever closer to outlawing discrimination on the grounds of caste. It would be particularly fitting for the UK to change its law because the UK has so many citizens with South Asian backgrounds as a result of former imperial links.

The presentations to Baroness Thornton at that meeting were powerful and heartfelt. Some talked about being prevented from promotion to management posts or even being self-employed. Others said that their caste prevented their children from attending a local publicly-funded faith school (presumably Hindu) and how such religiously segregated schools impeded social cohesion. One man spoke of his suffering which he did not want his children to bear. In contrast, one young Dalit man said it was time to stand up and be counted – To come out and declare:

WE ARE DALIT AND WE ARE PROUD

It was clear that these spontaneous statements moved the Minister. She said that her Department had just commissioned a study of the extent of the discrimination in the UK. Unfortunately, however, the study would not be completed until after the Bill was finalised. The Government said it might introduce a power in the Bill for a Minister to trigger caste discrimination protection in the future if they thought it justified, perhaps on the basis of evidence included in the study.

However, as the study will not be ready until after the General Election there was a distinct possibility that the power to introduce caste discrimination legislation would not be invoked, particularly if there was a change in Government.

The Peers present – Lords Avebury, Lester and Harries argued that there was no need for a study; enough evidence has been provided by the delegates. How much discrimination did there need to be to justify legislation? Was this not a question of principle – and even if there were no evidence of discrimination, what was wrong with declaratory law (simply saying this behaviour is unacceptable and making it unlawful)? She agreed to pass on the strength of feeling for an immediate change in the law, to which she seemed sympathetic. She suggested that perhaps we should try to lobby both for an immediate change and also – in case we were not successful – the power to introduce it in future.

Lord Lester QC, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on Discrimination Law Reform:

“Let us hope the Government will add a power in the Bill to enable them to make caste discrimination unlawful by Ministerial order so as to prevent this ancient source of injustice and oppression from taking root here. Mahatma Gandhi's struggle against the evils of caste-ism should inspire Government and Parliament.”

Lord Avebury, who moved the amendment on caste discrimination at Committee Stage:

“If the momentum of the campaign is kept up, we should get there”.

Meena Varma, Director, Dalit Solidarity Network UK

“The UK has a unique opportunity to lead the way in Europe and be the first country to protect the rights of many of its citizens from the Asian Diaspora. We urge the government to act now”.