

Work and Descent-Based Discrimination in the South Asian Diaspora
*A briefing paper for the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection
of Human Rights*

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Discrimination on the basis of work and descent continues to affect diaspora communities whose cultures and traditions are transposed to the new environment. Caste has migrated with the South Asian diaspora and is seen in East and South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, the Middle East (for example in *Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates*), Malaysia, the Caribbean, the United Kingdom, North America, and other regions.¹ This was noted in the previous Sub-Commission Working Paper² and this paper seeks to address this area.³ The Working Paper identified several consequences of this type of discrimination and this report will follow this format when looking at the affected communities, although the main focus here will be the *United States* and the *United Kingdom*.⁴ Experiences in other countries have been included where evidence was available.

Available research in these areas is limited and further study is required. Further study is also required for other affected communities, such as members of the West African and Japanese diaspora.

Forms of social segregation

Intermarriage

The area where discrimination is most common amongst the South Asian diaspora is the social prohibition against intermarriage between castes. Although this is less prevalent than in India and views are changing amongst second and third generation members, matrimonial sections of the ethnic and wider press still show a preference for marriage within one's caste.⁵ A glance at many of the matrimonial websites demonstrates this as there is a section for caste in the profile. Many suitors do list their caste although a few

¹ Smita Narula, *Caste Discrimination: A Global Concern* (Human Rights Watch Report, September 2001) <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2001/globalcaste/>

² Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights Working Paper: Prevention of Discrimination by Mr. Eide and Yokota – 26 June 2003.

³ South Asians have immigrated to many countries and there are particularly large concentrations of the South Asian diaspora in countries such as the USA (New York and Washington in particular), United Kingdom (Midlands and South East) and Canada (Toronto and Vancouver).

⁴ Young members of the diaspora community, especially those who have been exposed to racist behaviour, often try to find identity in their communities. Those from higher castes view their superior status as an advantage and as a form of community and security. Satpal Muman "Caste in Britain" http://www.ambedkar.org/Worldwide_Dalits/caste_in_britain.htm (accessed 1st December 2003). Caste consciousness is also promulgated through the media, especially in *Britain* where there is a large Asian media. Punjabi is the most commonly spoken language amongst Asians in Britain and Bhangra music has also become very popular. Many songs played on the Radio mention the upper-caste Jats and encourage caste consciousness and caste superiority. Some car stickers in Britain have been seen with the words "Jattan de putt" signifying that sons of Jats are the greatest. Satpal Muman "Caste in Britain" Muman lists several examples of these songs in his paper. Naresh Puri interviewed Balbir Grewal, head of Southall's Guru Granth Shab temple who emphasised the importance of maintaining a caste identity. DJ Bobby Friction also mentions many Asian songs which allude to the power of the jats. BBC Radio 4 Transcript "The Caste Divide" April 2003 (Appendix 1). The growing tide of Sikh nationalism in India has also translated into a stronger caste consciousness amongst young Sikhs in the UK. Bobby Friction, *Ibid*.

⁵ This can be seen from the Indian press e.g. *India Abroad, The Asian Reporter* etc. Satpal Muman "Caste in Britain" – Muman lists some examples from the UK.

say it is “no bar.”⁶ At the Suman Bureau, one of the UK’s oldest matrimonial agencies, caste is still a strong factor. Many lower caste members would prefer to marry someone from the same background, for fear of being victimised.⁷ In the UK, even those who do not have their marriages arranged, are taught the importance of staying within one’s caste. Those who ignore this can find themselves cut off from their family and community.⁸ In the US, it is perceived to be easier to marry outside one’s race in the *US* rather than outside one’s caste.⁹

This is also reflected in the matrimonial ads placed in *Malaysia* by the minority Indian community and marriage brokers may be expected to take caste into account when finding suitable matches.¹⁰ One researcher observed that, “Caste has, indeed, such a strong hold in marriage matters that inter-caste marriages between different categories of higher caste status sometimes do not take place with parents’ approval, much less between higher and lower caste members. Abolition of caste discrimination in this area remains a distant dream.”¹¹

*Commensality*¹²

Social avoidance of commensality is also demonstrated amongst the South Asian diaspora, although on a much lesser and infrequent level than in India. For example, in Wolverhampton in the *UK* a customer refused to take change from the vendor to avoid being “polluted” and insisted the change be placed on the counter. Reference has been made to a factory in Wolverhampton where upper caste Jat women refused to take water from the same tap as lower caste people. Another example is during an inter-temple sport

⁶<http://www.indiandating.com/>, www.indianmarriages.com, www.indianmatches.com, and <http://www.shaadi.com>. The website <http://www.kaakateeya.com> asks the question “Are you ready for an inter caste marriage?”

⁷ Parar Bagawar, owner of the Suman Bureau, interviewed by Naresh Puri, “The Caste Divide” Sometimes the bureau will have to investigate people in order to discover their true caste identity.

⁸ Naresh Puri, “The Caste Divide”

⁹ Interview with Dr. Berwa, influential actor in Dalit movement in the US, 1st December 2003 (on file with the author)

Anamika Arora mentions that caste is very influential in Sikh marriages. “*Selfless Service Aims to Bring Solidarity and Awareness at the Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha of New York*” <http://www.barnard.edu/religion/hinduismhere/anamika.html> (accessed 4th December 2003)

Rev. Gideon Jebamani mentions that in the Tamil community in New York it is important to marry within one’s caste. He gives an example of being approached by a member of his congregation to find a bride but from the ‘Jati’ caste. “*Dalit Christians: From Submission to Liberation*” Doctor of Ministry, Demonstration Project Proposal & Preliminary Research, New York Theological Seminary. First Draft pg. 8 (on file with the author)

¹⁰ Wani Muthiah, “Pride and Prejudice,” *The Star* (Kuala Lumpur), November 24, 1997.

¹¹ Rajakrishnan Ramasamy, *Caste Consciousness Among Indian Tamils in Malaysia* (Selangor, Malaysia: Pelanduk Publications, 1984), p. 46. Similarly, in *Canada*, most marriages are within caste groups. Occasionally, when intercaste marriages do take place, families of the upper caste son/daughter often boycott the wedding ceremony even though the ceremony is conducted as per the Sikh code of conduct. E-mail Jai Birdi, CHETNA Association of Canada, 9th December 2003.

¹²The act or practice of eating at the same table.

tournament where, although the teams participated in the tournament, the majority Jats did not eat the sanctified food (Langar) as it was made by the lower caste Chamaars.¹³

In the *US*, incidents were referred to where social functions are dominated by upper caste traditions and the different caste members eat separately.¹⁴ The predominantly upper caste Indian diaspora ensured that the India Chair at Columbia University, from where the famous leader of the Dalit movement Dr. Ambedkar graduated, was not named after him.¹⁵ In general, lower castes will often avoid social interaction with upper castes or some will hide their caste if they do socially interact.¹⁶

In *Malaysia*, this is seen within rather than outside the home. Some families, for example, refuse to dine with or accept food and drinks from people they suspect of being lower caste.¹⁷

In *Trinidad* in some instances the residence of lower castes is restricted. There is also some restricted commensality, for example with Trinidadian Brahmin priests at rituals. In *Guyana* there are examples of upper castes not wanting to eat at the homes of lower caste members.¹⁸

Places of worship

Many places of worship are formulated along caste lines.¹⁹ For example, among Indian Christians the very denomination itself indicates the caste background of the congregation.²⁰ Caste divisions have led to splits in Church congregations, such as in 1981 there was a split in the Tamil Church in *New York* which led to the formation of a new Dalit Tamil Church in Elmhurst, New York.²¹ There is a feeling among some

¹³ Caste in Britain – Satpal Muman

¹⁴ Rev. Gideon Jebamani refers to social functions such as Tamilians Day organised by the New York Tamil Cultural Association. “*Dalit Christians: From Submission to Liberation*” First Draft pg. 11

¹⁵ “Caste off Caste” Ra Ravishankar Daily Illini 5 November 2003, “The UN, racism and caste” *The Hindu* Gail Omvedt April 9, 2001 <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/04/09/stories/05092524.htm> (accessed 4th December 2003), e-mail from Ra Ravishankar 4th December 2003 (on file with the author)

¹⁶ Interview with Roja Singh, Head of Dalit Solidarity Forum, USA 20th October 2003. Dr. Eleanor Zelliott, leading scholar on Dalit issues, Carleton College, Minnesota, USA, e-mail 1st December 2003 (on file with the author)

Dr. K.P. Singh gives three examples of Dalit doctors in the US in his article “Negotiating dalit-hood in USA” *The Dalit March*/ April 2003, pg. 14 Dr. Kumar (name changed) does not disclose his lower caste identity, Dr. Deepankar is tactful about approaching Dalit issues to non-Dalits (a strategist) whereas Dr. Berwa is an exception being very vocal about his Dalit identity.

¹⁷ Muthiah, “Pride and Prejudice.”

¹⁸ R.K. Jain as quoted in Vivek Kumar (Assistant Professor of Sociology, Jawaharlal Nehru University) “Dalit Diaspora” *Voices From Vancouver: Souvenir of the International Dalit Conference*, Vancouver, Canada May 16 – 18, 2003 pg. 53

¹⁹ Caste in Britain – Satpal Muman

²⁰ For example, Syrian Orthodox (Brahmin caste), Mar Thoma (Middle Caste), CSI Church (Sudhra and Dalit castes) Rev. Gideon Jebamani “*Dalit Christians: From Submission to Liberation*” First Draft pg. 10

²¹ The split in 1981 is attributed to upper caste members having greater power in the Church and derogatory remarks made about lower castes when they raised the matter of unequal representation. The desire to join with the Reformed Church of America was also supposedly rejected by non-Dalits because of its ministry

members that high caste Christians control the Church by pre-empting the key leadership positions. This makes Dalit Christians feel ignored and insignificant. An example was given of a church in *New Jersey, USA* where Dalits are not officially excluded but are made to feel unwelcome and are left out of important church decisions.²²

Other examples of segregation include less participation by the other members when Dalit members give a fellowship meal. This is also seen in poor attendance where there is a visiting speaker from India who is a Dalit.²³

Despite the ideology of Sikhism, which aims at transcending caste distinctions, these distinctions are very present in practice. In the *US* and in *Canada*, particularly Vancouver, Ramdasi and Ravidasi Sikhs are not completely accepted by Jat and Katri Sikhs and so *gurdwaras* (Sikh houses of worship) are segregated in terms of caste. Lower caste people are reportedly not made to feel welcome in upper caste *gurdwaras*.²⁴ Similarly, the Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha of *Queens, New York* is a *gurdwara* mainly for lower caste Sikhs and upper caste Sikhs would not feel appropriate worshipping here.²⁵ This is also seen in the *UK*, for example with the Guru Ravidass Gurdawara in Bedford.²⁶

The Hindu Temple in *Flushing, Queens, New York* reflects the existing caste structure in India with upper caste members having leadership positions from which Dalits are excluded.²⁷ In the *UK*, due to caste prejudices, many lower caste members have also formed their own separate organisations and temples. An example of this is the Central Valmik Sabha (UK) and Valmiki temples.²⁸ Some, such as Suresh Grover of the National Civil Rights Movement (UK) feels the proliferation of places of worship on caste lines is creating profound divisions.²⁹

among Dalits in India. The new church was renamed the New York Chrithuva Tamil Koil (New York Tamil Church) in 1989. Rev. Gideon Jebamani “*Dalit Christians: From Submission to Liberation*” First Draft pg. 9/ Interview Rev. Gideon Jebamani 17th November 2003 (on file with the author)

²² United Methodist Church, Barnes Road, Paterson, New Jersey. Interview with Roja Singh 20th October 2003

²³ As an example, Rev. Gideon states when the CSI Moderator, Rev. K.T. Samuel was invited to preach in his church St Paul’s, Yonkers the Officers of St. Gregorian Orthodox Church responded negatively when asked to bring greetings, perceived as due to the Moderator’s Dalit background. However, this was not so when New York Episcopal Dicoesan Bishop Mark Sisk (an American) came to the church. Rev. Gideon Jebamani “*Dalit Christians: From Submission to Liberation*” First Draft pg. 12

²⁴ Dr. Eleanor Zelliot, e-mail 16th November 2003. Interview with Rev John Webster, Editor of Dalit International Newsletter, 18th November 2003. Interview with Mohan Gill (Balviki Sikh, California) 3rd December 2003. Interview with Yogesh Varhade, Founder-President, Ambedkar Centre for Justice and Peace (on file with the author)

²⁵ Anamika Arora “*Selfless Service Aims to Bring Solidarity and Awareness at the Shri Guru Ravidas Sabha of New York*” <http://www.barnard.edu/religion/hinduismhere/anamika.html>

²⁶ Nareshi Puri “The Caste Divide”

²⁷ Rev. Gideon Jebamani “*Dalit Christians: From Submission to Liberation*” pg. 11

²⁸ Davinder Prasad, *Press Release on Behalf of the UK Valmiki Community*, 28th February 2003 (on file with the author)

²⁹ Nareshi Puri “The Caste Divide”. Local Authorities questioned said that specific questions about caste were not asked when decisions were made for grants to local communities to build temples and that it was a difficult situation to monitor.

Employment

Caste discrimination has also been alleged in the area of employment in both the *UK* and *US*. For example, Pinaki Mazumder, Professor of Engineering at the University of Michigan, has filed a first of its kind federal civil rights lawsuit claiming discrimination based on caste and national origin. He claims that discrimination by an Indian administrator of a higher caste in the engineering department affected his performance reviews and pay raises.³⁰ The lawsuit also alleges that the university did nothing to stop the bias, trivialized his concerns, and retaliated against him when he complained.

There are other incidents of caste discrimination in the area of employment but they do not often lead to any legal action as many people do not know where to complain.³¹

Mauritius, has a large Indian diaspora population and social organization is based on family, kinship networks, and "to a not negligible extent, caste-based organization." Caste-based considerations have also been reported in the political and employment sector.³²

Politics

In the *UK*, caste is alleged to have played a discriminatory role in politics.³³ Some in the *UK* feel that leaders of the Asian community are promoting racial equality but not doing enough to promote equality within the Asian community. An example was given of a local upper caste Councillor in Coventry authoring a booklet promoting the caste system and its practices.³⁴

³⁰ Complaint filed in the Washtenaw Circuit Court (State of Michigan) *Mazumder v University of Michigan* http://www.faupel.com/art_080303.htm (accessed on 1st December 2003)

See also "Suit claims discrimination based on caste" *Ann Arbor News* - Sunday, June 22, 2003 Liz Cobbs <http://www.emalayalee.com/818n.htm>

³¹ Interview with Mohan Gill (Balviki Sikh, California) 3rd December 2003 – he referred to an incident where his daughter was refused a job when a member of the upper caste found out about her lower caste status and another incident when three lower caste women were fired after petty incidents by the employer who was of a higher caste.

³² For example, a highly qualified Mauritian woman stated that she would never get a high position in the state bureaucracy because she was a Brahmin. Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Indians in New Worlds: Mauritius and Trinidad," *Social and Economic Studies*, No. 1 (1992), <http://www.uio.no/~geirthe/Indians.html> (accessed on 2nd December 2003)

By organising different socio-religious associations (e.g. Vaish Mukthi Sangh, Gahlot Rajput Maha Sabha, Arya Ravived Pracharini Sabha) caste populations have emerged as important interest groups bargaining for their share of state resources (particularly government jobs) which are distributed through political patronage. Oddvar Hollop "Integration, cultural complexity and revivalism in Mauritius" <http://www.iias.nl/kreeft/IIASNONLINE/Newsletters/Newsletter10/Regional/10CCCA01.html> (accessed 6th December 2003)

³³ For example, Ram Lakha, a Labour Councillor, states that there was much resentment when his name was put forward by members of the Labour Party in 1989 and upper caste members waged a campaign to get him out as he was lower caste. Interview with Naresh Puri, "The Caste Divide"

³⁴ In 1995/6 Prashotam Lal Joshi formulated a booklet 'A guide to minority ethnic customs religions and aiming systems in Coventry' which stated 'Caste is inherited by birth and one cannot change or leave one's caste. Hindus in Britain may wish to observe the caste system and wish to avoid dining and

Caste was also a driving force in a lengthy dispute between two prominent *Malaysian* Indian politicians, All Malaysian Indian Progressive Front (IPF) president Datuk M. G. Pandithan, and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) party president Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu. In 1988, Pandithan, then the MIC's vice president, was expelled from the party for accusing the MIC of practicing caste-based politics that favored higher castes.³⁵ In 1997, Vellu rejected Pandithan's claim that "casteism is a deep-rooted issue in Malaysia which is silently but strongly being practised." Pandithan was particularly critical of the existence of some twenty-two registered caste-based associations in Malaysia dedicated to assisting members of their own caste socially and financially. These associations sometimes impose caste-based restrictions on members, such as banning exogamous marriages.³⁶

Violence

Though violence is rare in the diaspora population, there have been cases of physical violence for those who have entered into inter-caste marriages or eloped against their families' will.³⁷ In an extreme example, Vijay Bulla, a man from *Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA*, was killed in October 1999 after he entered into a heated argument with Satish Mariswamy, a man he rejected as a suitor for his wife's sister in India as he was of a lower caste.³⁸

In the *US*, there have been incidents of fights when lower caste members try to stand for leadership in higher caste gurdwaras.³⁹ In the *UK*, there are examples of fights breaking out amongst university students when derogatory remarks about one's caste are made.⁴⁰

Dalit conversion to Christianity has also heightened tensions, not only in India but also within the diaspora, such as in the *UK*.⁴¹

intermarriage with members of other castes' The draft booklet was withheld and an apology was issued by the Council but no disciplinary action taken. Naresh Puri "The Caste Divide."

³⁵ "Pandithan's dilemma - to be or not to be in MIC," *Utusan Express*, January 26, 2001.

³⁶ Muthiah, "Pride and Prejudice"; Ramasamy, *Caste Consciousness among Indian Tamils in Malaysia*, pp. 74-75.

³⁷ Caste in Britain – Satpal Muman.

³⁸ Mariswamy was convicted of first-degree murder and given a life sentence. Case No: CRW-99-12982-FC (22nd Circuit Court, Washtenaw County, Michigan)

See Liz Cobbs "Suit claims discrimination based on caste" *Ann Arbor News* - Sunday, June 22, 2003 <http://www.emalayalee.com/818n.htm>

³⁹ Interview with Yogesh Varhade 3rd December 2003

⁴⁰ Rama and Parveen, interviewed by Naresh Puri, "The Caste Divide"

⁴¹ There are now over 100 Asian Christian Congregations in the UK. Pradeep Sudhra (Chair for the Alliance for Asian Christians who preaches to low-caste Hindus) comments on the hate mail she receives from Hindus. Interview with Naresh Puri "The Caste Divide"

Legislation

In the United Kingdom and the United States there are laws against racial discrimination. It is not conclusive, but these could be interpreted broadly to include caste. Some of the instances of discrimination mentioned may come under these laws.

United Kingdom

The *Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2003* ('*the Race Regulations*')⁴² makes it unlawful to discriminate against anyone on grounds of race, colour, nationality (including citizenship), or ethnic or national origin. Relevant provisions include:

1.-(1) A person discriminates against another in any circumstances relevant for the purposes of any provision of this Act if-

(a) on racial grounds he treats that other less favourably than he treats or would treat other persons; or

(b) he applies to that other a requirement or condition which he applies or would apply equally to persons not of the same racial group as that other but-

(i) which is such that the proportion of persons of the same racial group as that other who can comply with it is considerably smaller than the proportion of persons not of that racial group who can comply with it; and
(ii) which he cannot show to be justifiable irrespective of the colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins of the person to whom it is applied; and
(iii) which is to the detriment of that other because he cannot comply with it.⁴³

3. In section 1 of the 1976 Act (racial discrimination), after subsection (1), insert

" (1A) A person also discriminates against another if, in any circumstances relevant for the purposes of any provision referred to in subsection (1B), he applies to that other a provision, criterion or practice which he applies or would apply equally to persons not of the same race or ethnic or national origins as that other, but -

(a) which puts or would put persons of the same race or ethnic or national origins as that other at a particular disadvantage when compared with other persons,

(b) which puts that other at that disadvantage, and

(c) which he cannot show to be a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim.⁴⁴

3.-(1) In this Act, unless the context otherwise requires-

⁴² <http://www.hmso.gov.uk/si/si2003/20031626.htm>

⁴³ Race Relations Act 1976 s.1(1)

⁴⁴ Race Relations Act 1976 (Amendment) Regulations 2003 s.3

"racial grounds" means any of the following grounds, namely colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins;
"racial group" means a group of persons defined by reference to colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origins, and references to a person's racial group refer to any racial group into which he falls.⁴⁵

The *Race Regulations* apply to areas such as employment, training, education; access to, and supply of, goods and services that are available to the public, including housing; social protection; and social advantage. The Race Regulations also abolish the exceptions from the prohibition against discrimination in the Race Relations Act.⁴⁶ Of note is employment in a private household. The amended Act also imposes positive duties on many public authorities to promote racial equality.

Inciting racial hatred is also a criminal offence, such as publishing and disseminating materials that are likely to incite racial hatred. The *Public Order Act 1986*, Part III, s. 19 states:

“A person who publishes or distributes written material which is threatening, abusive or insulting is guilty of an offence if:

He intends thereby to stir up racial hatred, or

Having regard to all the circumstances racial hatred is likely to be stirred up thereby.

“In proceedings for an offence under this section it is a defence for an accused who is not shown to have intended to stir up racial hatred to prove that he was not aware of the content of the material and did not suspect, and had no reason to suspect, that it was threatening, abusive or insulting.

“References in this part to the publication or distribution of written material are to its publication or distribution to the public or a section of the public.”⁴⁷

Complaints can be made to the Press Complaints Commission or the Broadcasting Standards Authority.

United States of America

Federal laws prohibit discrimination based on a person's national origin, race, color, religion, disability, sex, and familial status. Laws prohibiting national origin discrimination make it illegal to discriminate because of a person's birthplace, ancestry, culture or language.

⁴⁵ Race Relations Act 1976 s.3

⁴⁶ Such as in relation to small dwellings; employment in a private household; charities in their role as employers; and partnerships of six or less partner.

⁴⁷ The *Malicious Communications Act 1988 s.1(1)* allows for “the prosecution of any person who sends to another person a letter or other article which conveys a message which is indecent or grossly offensive, a threat, or information which is false and known to be or believed to be false by the sender or any other article which is, in the whole or part, of an indecent or grossly offensive nature.”
http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts1988/Ukpga_19880027_en_1.htm

This has been amended by the *Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001 s.43* to include mail sent electronically. <http://www.hmso.gov.uk/acts/acts2001/10016--d.htm#39>

The *Civil Rights Act of 1964* prohibits discrimination based on "race, color, religion, or national origin" in public establishments that have a connection to interstate commerce or are supported by the state.⁴⁸ An argument could be made that this applies to avoidance of commensality due to caste status, although this would not include places of worship.

Chapter 21 (Civil Rights), Subchapter VI of Title 42 U.S.C 2000e prohibits employment discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex and national origin.⁴⁹

States also have their own laws prohibiting discrimination in areas such as public housing.⁵⁰

International Human Rights Law

The Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has repeatedly affirmed that caste, as a form of descent-based discrimination, falls within the definition of racial discrimination under article 1 of the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*. Both the UK and the US have ratified CERD.⁵¹

Recommendations

In August 2002 CERD issued a General Recommendation on 'caste and analogous systems of inherited status'.⁵² Governments with South Asian communities where caste discrimination is being practiced should implement these recommendations. Countries, such as *Malaysia*, which have still not ratified CERD, should do so and fully implement its provisions. Several key recommendations are highlighted below.

1. Of note in the General Recommendation are recommendations 2 and 3 that state that countries should incorporate prohibitions against descent-based discrimination in their constitutions or legislation. Considering the prevalence of caste discrimination in these countries, its explicit prohibition should be incorporated in the above-mentioned legislation. Caste prejudice should be recognised as a form of institutional discrimination.
2. Governments and interested organisations, such as the International Dalit Solidarity Network, should continue to identify affected communities and compile research as to their situations.

Concerned governments should:

⁴⁸ [42 U.S.C. § 2000a](#).

⁴⁹ <http://www4.law.cornell.edu/uscode/42/2000e-2.html>

⁵⁰ For example, NY CLS Civ R § 18-c (2003) or the Michigan Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act provides that an employer may not discriminate on the basis of religion, color, national origin, age, sex, height, weight, familial status or marital status. MCL 37. 2202

⁵¹ The US ratified CERD on 20/11/94 and the UK on 06/04/69. Other countries referred to in this report have also ratified CERD, such as Canada 15/11/70, Guyana 17/03/77, Mauritius 29/06/72 and Trinidad and Tobago 03/11/73. Of note, Malaysia remains a non-state party.

⁵² CERD General Recommendation XXIX on Descent-based Discrimination
<http://www.dalitfreedom.org/pdf/UN/cerd-reso.pdf>

3. Extend invitations to the Special Rapporteur on racism to investigate caste-based discrimination in their respective countries
4. Ensure existing statutory institutions investigate and monitor developments.⁵³
5. Ensure non discrimination in employment
6. Take measures to encourage equal access to public areas and places of worship.
7. Identify areas prone to descent based violence and take preventative measures.
8. Take resolute measures to secure rights of descent based communities who wish to marry outside the community
9. Combat discrimination in terms of private owners, such as access to residence
10. Monitor the media, levels of discrimination and hate speech. Engage the Asian Media to highlight these issues and inform them of existing discriminatory practices.
11. Form stronger links with South Asian diaspora communities and together encourage dialogue between various groups.
12. Monitor teaching about caste in schools and encourage a more thought provoking curriculum.⁵⁴
13. Launch nation wide public education campaigns highlighting areas of prejudice, what actions are legally prohibited and resources available to victims of discrimination and abuse.

⁵³ For example, the Commission for Racial Equality in the UK or the Civil Rights Commission in the USA.

⁵⁴ In the UK, religious education is taught to pupils which includes caste groups within the Hindu tradition. Many Dalits find this uncomfortable and it raises confusion for many children. (Naresh Puri “The Caste Divide”) It would be desirable to involve all members of the Asian community to decide changes in educational policy or make an effort to include information on the prejudicial effects of the caste system so that students have a balanced view. For example, in Key Stage 3 students are taught about “Identity and Responsibility in Hinduism” and “jati (caste) as a kinship system and support group the hereditary and evolving nature of caste”

APPENDIX 1

RADIO 4

The Caste Divide – April 2003

BBC's community affairs reporter Naresh Puri investigates the rise of one of the most hidden forms of hierarchy in Britain today: The Indian Caste system. [John Cleese] "I look down on him because I am upper class".

[Ronnie Barker] "I look up to him because he is upper class".

The British class system as parodied by John Cleese and the two Ronnies in the Frost report.

[Ronnie Corbett] "I know my place". [Laughter].

Since the end of the Second World War, the class system has been the butt of many jokes, but it's been the enemy of politicians such as John Major who aimed to bring about what he described as a truly classless society. But there are many who argue that there is now another equally potent but imported form of social hierarchy taking hold in Britain – and that's the Indian caste system.

"Caste has caused division and it does cause social devastation. The problem is that nobody has accepted the problem within this country. Caste is one area which is totally swept under the carpet".

"I don't feel hurt by the racial discrimination. It's the caste system, which makes me feel absolutely disgusted. People of the same stock, people from the same continent, people with the same problems, they practice the caste discrimination and they make you feel subhuman".

"Our Indian people have come to England, they go to America, they go to Canada, they go to all over Europe, but unfortunately, wherever they go they take caste system with them as well".

The voices of British Indians who've made their home in contemporary multicultural Britain. Yet today, they still feel they can be victimised because of the caste system. Caste is often associated with rural India - a time and place at odds with British Society today. It's a system of hierarchy in which birth determines who is at the top of the social ladder and who is at the bottom. For many of the nearly 1 million Britains of Indian origin, the caste system continues to exert a powerful influence over their everyday lives. It can determine who they can marry, who they socialise with, which temple they pray at, and whether they will have any respect amongst their peers. But it is still a subject which within the Indian community here are unwilling to discuss openly. At the heart of this discomfort are a group of people who are considered to be beneath the rest of society –

the Untouchables. There are now an estimated 200,000 people from formerly Untouchable backgrounds living in the UK. They include second and third generation Indians many of them who don't want to categorise themselves as Untouchables, but find that others do. Brother and sister Rama and Parveen are one such example.

“There's trouble everywhere. You can go to Derby; you can go to Birmingham. Go to the student nights and you see it. Someone will get called a name and it will all kick off from there, and then get what you will call a ruck on your hands”. [Rama]

“Yah. I wasn't aware that this caste thing existed in my community. It meant nothing to me until I went to university, and then suddenly my caste was more important than the degree I was doing and the person I was. It wasn't what are you doing? What sort of person are you? It was what caste are you and then I'll decide if I want to be friends with you”. [Parveen]

So basically even in this day and age you still got abuse?

“We get treated like lower class. They believe they are the tractor drivers and we are their farm workers, we pull out the potatoes while they eat”. [Rama]

And they refer to the traditional high caste of Hindu society, the Brahmins whose job it was to pursue knowledge whilst the Shudras at the bottom were traditionally occupied with menial work. Untouchables often called chooras and chamars were considered even beneath this – falling outside the system altogether. The routes of Rama and Praveen's experience lies back in India where the State legally outlawed the status of untouchability in the 1950s. But traditional hostility towards Untouchables remained. Many first generation British Indians clearly remember these experiences, such as Ram Lakha.

“Back in the school, back in India, we were not allowed to drink water from the same pitcher. Somebody had to pour the water onto my hands so I can drink whereas others could pick up the glass and drink it. I had a rotten bag which I used to push all the books in. People used to drop mud, bricks, leaves and everything into my bag but I couldn't do much about it. I was beaten up by the kids because they thought I was not supposed to be equal to them”.

Although British Indians don't have to contend with such severe discrimination, experiences such as Ram Lakha's have permeated Indian cultural memory and continue to exert a potent force on relations between castes in Britain today. That's because unlike the class system the notion of pollution is at the heart of the Indian caste structure. Bhikhu Parekh a Centennial Professor at the London School of Economics and the Chair of the recent commission on the future of multiethnic Britain.

“Those people who are engaged in work which one considers as dirty like collecting human dirt which was not only seen as very menial, but also activities which could spread disease. These people were kept at a distance because they were sources of infection if you like. So there was a moral pollution because they were not good enough

to other things. There was physical pollution because they dealt with human dirt and therefore these people were regarded as those people not to be touched. Hence they came to be called Untouchables. The British called them depressed classes and Ghandi called them Harijans (children of God) and today they call themselves Dalits which means the oppressed”.

The routes of the caste system and untouchability might seem to lie in ancient Hindu culture dating back some 5000 years. But there is an increasingly held view that it was the encounter between two hierarchical cultures a few hundred years ago that gave us the caste system we’ve inherited today. Judith Brown is a professor of Hinduism studies at Oxford University.

“The British who actually went to India in the late 19th and 20th century were very much from one social world in Britain, the professional administrative class or the officer class in the army and that slotted like another caste at the top of the hierarchy. They found no difficulty in understanding a hierarchal society because they came from near the top of one themselves”.

“The later part of the British rule turned caste into the basis of Hindu society. They took an extremely rigid and static view. And therefore they created the illusion that caste was premolar that they have always existed and from 1931 when British made caste as one of the important issues to collect data in the census it became rigid. Once people felt that they had identified themselves as belonging to caste a or b, they somehow had to stick to it”.

And another result of that interaction between these two cultures has resulted in this - Southall in West London one of the numerous established areas across the country today. It’s a place where more than 50 years of migration has created a town which local people fondly refer to as Little India. As another Asian part of the UK they’ve brought with them their cultural landscape, music, their food and their own brand of shops. And of course, they have also imported religion and social values too. When mass migration took off in the 50s, the vast majority who arrived were men who left their families behind. Initially caste had little impact on their lives. But as large scale migration continued in the 60s and 70s, caste acquired greater significance. Parminder Singh is a former deputy chair of the Commission for Racial Equality.

“As the size of the migrant community increased, particularly in terms of families joining their breadwinners, caste became a prominent issue because once the families are there then the question arises of people trying to find partners for their children. It is in this context that caste got its traditional significance”.

And today many second and third generation Indians are still encouraged to have arranged marriages where their partners are from the same caste as them. Even those who don’t have their marriages arranged are taught the importance of staying within the boundaries of caste. Those ignoring this can find themselves cut off from family and communities – as this young man who wanted to remain anonymous found out:

“I met [somesew?] and just like started meeting each other and started falling in love slowly. Then we just thought we should get married. Her parents didn’t agree. I’m quite educated. I had good a job, worked for banks. They would only oppose us because they thought they were of a higher creed or caste than myself. Nothing else. Her parents started beating her up. One day her dad beat her up so much that I had to take her away from that house. Her back was like full of bruises and everything and I took her to the doctors. I was like under so much stress that how could people do this to their own daughter. They are like willing to hurt their daughter. They are willing to throw her away just because they think the person she loves is lower than them”.

You were both totally cut off from her parents?

“I didn’t stop her from seeing her parents but she would say that like you are not allowed to go there, let me go myself this and that. So I let her do it, but deep down I was thinking if they don’t accept me as your husband, you’re doing the same thing. I let it all go because I didn’t want to put pressure on her. So eventually they just brainwashed her and ruined our marriage”.

Was it caste that ultimately broke down your marriage?

“Yes, caste. Silly caste system”. [Ends]

“How old are you?

I’m 28 years old”.

Here at the Suman Bureau, one of Britain’s oldest matrimonial agencies, many second and third generation Indians still come for help in finding a life partner. Caste is still a strong factor according to the owner Parar Bagawar “People are still mentioning the issue of caste and bringing it up when it comes to marriage and generally it is the lower caste that are sort of outcaste is the word simply because people don’t want to marry into a lower caste. And then we also find these days that those who originate from a lower caste prefer to meet someone of the same background because they know that they will perhaps be victimised so to say the fact that they are of a lower caste. The first generation are still around and have very strong beliefs and to some extent they have put those beliefs into their children as well”.

“If somebody came and said he was an ex-Untouchable I think many progressive Hindus, however they may try to get rid of caste, would somehow feel they were superior and this man was inferior and that their daughters and sons shouldn’t marry. But if you look at the rest of the Hindus, there the caste system is in decline. There is a great feeling here and as in India that unless Hindus unite they will not be able to make much progress. So middle and higher caste are beginning to unite. Roughly, I would say that nearly 25 percent of the Hindu marriages here in Britain are taking place across the caste barriers”. [Bhikhu Parekh]

But that change at the top does not seem to be filtering down. For those from the lower caste, marriage from outside their communities remains fraught with difficulties. There is evidence that some of them are changing their names to disguise their backgrounds. Parar Bagwer:

“It does become a big problem. We’ve seen it a lot for example that in the Hindu community. There are a lot of Sharmas all of a sudden which is supposed to be a Brahmin very high caste. And the way you actually find out the reality is you ask them the roots where they originate from and that is when you actually establish that they are not as Brahmin as they say they are”.

So, on a lot of occasions you’re not simply a marriage bureau, but you have to investigate people? “Yes, we do for some clients. If they actually need us to then we can advise further. Normally it means going to deeper into the roots of where they originate from what names have been used in the past”.

But many people in Britain are no longer prepared to hide their identities.

[Recording of someone speaking in Punjabi.]

A religious service being conducted in Punjabi. But this isn’t taking place in a mosque or a temple – it’s a Christian church in Wolverhampton. The majority of recent converts here are former Untouchables. There are now over 100 Asian Christian congregations in the UK stretching from Glasgow to Southampton. Pradeep Sudhra is the Chair for the Alliance for Asian Christians and preaches to low-caste Hindus:

“It is not the Dalit or the down trodden person who needs Hinduism; it is the Brahmin and philosophical Hinduism that needs the oppressed people in order for their system to work. And really to be quite frank, I’m quite pleased that people who’ve been oppressed all these centuries are finding their own ways. I seek anyone unashamedly and preach to them in freedom in Jesus Christ. And if the Dalit are set free from that oppression because of my preaching about Jesus Christ, then I thank God for it”.

A lot of Hindus say you are taking away Hindus from the fold of Hinduism in the name of Christianity. You get hate mail?

“The air becomes blue when you read some of the hate mail I get, but then that’s part of life. If in my dying or in my living I see even just one little child set free, then thank God for it”.

But this attitude concerns many Hindus in Britain who point towards the controversy surrounding the issue of conversion in India. Their Christian missionaries have been attacked and some have lost their lives amid growing anger at mass conversions of low caste Hindus. [Nolekant Bringal] represents the British section of Hindu Parashad, an organisation which is at the heart of the Hindu nationalist campaign in India

“We have great respect for Christianity. There are good churches and we work with them here and in Britain but we do have certain fears. There are some Christian movements, evangelical movements, whose agenda is to convert and that breaks our Hindu society because conversion by attacking another religion by exploiting the ignorance, is something to be discouraged. Hinduism is reformative. It goes through reformations. If there are bad practices which have crept in, we appeal to modern Hindu society to reject them and reform”.

While the VHP is keen to distance Hindu from caste prejudice, many people are worried that the consciousness of caste has also crept into a religion which was meant to bring about equality.

[A Sikh prayer.]

A reading from a Sikh holy book the Shri Guru Granth Sahib. Sikhism was founded in India in the late 15th century by a former Hindu Guru Nanak, a strong opponent of the caste system. Those Hindus at the time who converted to the new religion were attracted to its egalitarian message. Suresh Grover is the chair of the National Civil Rights Movement:

“Sikhism was a rebellion against the Hindu caste system amongst other things. It was a rebellion against autocratic regimes that existed at that time. That is why everybody as a Sikh is called a Singh and a woman is called a Kaur because you couldn't distinguish the caste system, but Sikh people talk about the greatness of the Gurus but they never talk about the manner in which Sikhism was evolved to tackle caste. So the fundamental lesson of Sikhism is never developed”.

Many Sikhs now accept that their faith which was originally intended to breakdown the caste barrier has in fact absorbed them. The Sikh peasantry known as the jats believe they occupy the top position of the social ladder. Indeed many jats such as Balbir Grewal who heads Southall's Guru Granth Sahib temple are proud of their caste heritage. She is a rare voice amongst the Indian community who is willing to speak out about the importance of maintaining a caste identity.

“My father used to tell me you are born jat and you will die a jat. Everybody be proud of whatever creed caste they are and I think we should stick to it. It's like roots. How can you plant a tropical plant into a cold country? It has to be in a tropical country otherwise you are lost. We are already lost in this country by eastern and western cultures and if this carries on the time will come nobody will know which background religion or caste they come from”.

And the importance of maintaining a caste identity has not been ignored by the young British Sikhs.

[Bhangra singing and music]

In fact it has been central to the development of Britain's Punjabi dance music bhangra. Bobby Friction hosts Radio 1's Asian underground music show. "On a purely bhangra level there are many songs about jat pride, about the life of a jat, almost jat nationalism is running rampant in bhangra music now to the point where every bhangra album that comes out Britain has at least one track that alludes to the power of the jats. One of the most famous bhangra songs is ever is 'Putha jatta de' which mean we are the sons of jats and we are proud of who we are and what we do".

[Bhangra music]

But why are the young British Sikhs so committed to the idea of a caste identity? One event in recent Sikh history may offer an explanation.

[Old radio broadcast in English]

"The crisis involving Sikh extremist in Punjab has come to a climax in a bitter pitched battle between government troops and Sikhs holding out in their holy shrine in the Golden Temple at Amritsar. In heavy fighting which, began last night 300 hundred people have been killed – 250 of them Sikhs".

The hostility between Indian troops and Sikh separatist militants ended in the invasion of the Golden Temple in 1984 was the watershed in modern Sikh history. Bobby Friction says the rising tide of nationalism in India translated into a stronger caste consciousness amongst young Sikhs. "The Sikh nationalist movement in the 80s was jat-led. Their politics were specifically designed to appeal to the jat masses. Now when that filtered back to England, I think a lot of jats in England became more nationalistic. There were a lot of human rights atrocities committed by the Indian Government. About 90 per cent of the men whose lives were lost were jat. A lot of the militants started playing on that. It first started out as our Sikh men are being killed and it literally came down to the Indian government is killing our jat men. So it didn't actually help the cause of no caste in our religion".

[Sikh prayer]

A growing awareness of caste amongst both Sikhs and Hindus in Britain has led to another phenomenon – the building of temples based on caste. A large number of Sikh and Hindu temples across the UK are now run along caste lines. Members of each caste attending their very own temple. Guru Ravidass Gurdawara in Bedford is one such Sikh temple which caters for former Untouchables known as Ravidassis. They worship their own guru – Guru Ravidass, who championed rights of the Untouchables and his birthday is the biggest yearly event within the community. According to Gurmail Singh Chambers who is one of the Trustees of the Temple:

"This is what you can say is our Christmas Day today. So as far as the Ravidassi community is concerned once a year the whole of the community get together to

celebrate Guru Maharaj's birthday celebration and it will go on all day today until 6 or 7 o'clock. There will be fireworks tonight and the whole of the building will be lit up".

This is the big day?

"This is the day. This is the day I would say".

The temple is a lavishly constructed building costing nearly a million pounds and is equipped with a gym and a community centre. But Mr Chambers says the decision to build their own temple came out of necessity rather than choice.

"When I came to England in 1964, I noticed that there was a need because when I talked to the older people they told us that there was a Sikh gurudwara here but we were not really treated as equals".

What did people say to you?

"People used to say `Eh chamar va, ethokaur passe lelo othe pass bar nekal do".

So basically they were saying `Take their money and then kick them out of the temple'?

"Yes. So we started hiring halls and in 1974 we bought our own building. That was in Queens Park, the old Methodist church".

But there are many amongst the Indian community who feel the proliferation of temples along caste lines is creating profound divisions. Suresh Grover from the National Civil Rights Movement:

"Lots of local authorities give permissions for temples to be developed. And if you look at any Indian area in this country, they will allow not just a temple run on the basis of Brahmins but all lower castes. In fact what it does is consolidate and institutionalise caste discrimination".

We contacted several local authorities in Asian areas across the UK with existing temples. They confirmed that specific questions about caste are not asked when they make the decisions to give grants to local communities for temples to be built. They say that it is a very difficult situation to monitor.

Here at the Valmiki temple in West London built for a group of former Hindu Untouchables, caste divisions have led to a very public rift within the Hindu community. The Valmikis who attend the temple out rightly reject their roots. Piaralal Sobah is the cultural secretary at the temple.

"Hinduism is a very wide term not meaning religion, it means people. If we are applying Hinduism as people, then yes, we are Hindus. But if we are saying we are Hindu religion

then we are not because the Hindus have not accepted us for a long time. They have not now, and they never will. So how can you say we are Hindus? No”.

“I have been at many meetings where the Valmikis or the chamars or the ex-Untouchables strongly disassociate themselves from Hindu society and would have nothing to do with it. That trend is there. But I would have thought that this kind of isolation will sooner or later break down because there will be enough common interests to bind us together. For example if the Valmikis isolate themselves and they don't achieve well educationally or economically then they will have to fight for equal opportunities, therefore they will have to unite with other high caste Hindus and so on. So I would have thought the compulsions of politics will force them to come closer”.
[Bhikhu Parekh]

That compulsion to bind has not always been successful in uniting the British Indian community. When it comes to life in the private sphere, whether it is marriage or worshipping in a temple, those from the lowest castes feel they have been held back because of their place in the social hierarchy. And that sense of alienation has also spilled over to public life as well. Ram Lakha is a labour councillor in Coventry and from a formally Untouchable background:

“I became first a councillor in 1989. My name was put forward by the Labour Party and members of the Labour Party but there was a lot of resentment on my selection. One of the relatives came to tell me in the pub when we were having a pint. He came to tell me that such and such person came to say `Why are you going to vote for him because he is a chamar’. So there was some kind of whispering campaign within the membership and though I got through the first time, they increased the Labour Party membership. It was unfair the way it was put in. Members didn't know they were members. They were brought in to vote me out. They did the next year. They could not stomach that a person like me should be a community leader for them when they are from a so-called high caste. They had to wage a campaign to get me out. And I was out”.

Were you bitter?

“I was bitter. It is natural. But I knew that if I just keep showing the bitterness, that's what they want. So I found another ward where there were no Indians and that's where I came in and there was not a single member of Indian. I succeeded from there. I am still there from a long time”.

But these allegations are denied by Gordon Wright who was the secretary of the Labour Party's Northeast Coventry constituency at the time: “There's no way people would have recruited people to come in specifically to vote against Mr. Ram Lakha. One has to remember that at that time there was a conflict between the moderates in the party and those that we considered to be the left wingers of the party. He was regarded as a left winger. He was deselected because he was on the wrong side at the time”.

And obviously you are talking about politically and not caste-wise?

“Oh no, not caste-wise. I mean I did know that there is a caste system for Hindus and some of a higher caste would look down on those considered to be of a lower caste with some disdain but certainly nothing was ever brought into the open on that. If there had been a campaign about it, but certainly, I would have acted upon it. But what one Asian says to another in a conversation has really nothing to do with me”.

“I think white colleagues are aware of the issue. They know that this is going on in the Indian community but they also know that they need the votes because I don't have that many votes in our community, neither Ravidassi or Valmiki community. We haven't got that many votes city-wide we are a very small community. So they need the votes. The democracy is mobility in that sense”. [Ram Lakha]

And it is not just politics where accusations of caste prejudice abound. Many members of the lower caste feel that leaders of the Asian community are not doing enough to counter caste discrimination. In fact some go even further in their criticism of community leaders. Davinder Prasad is from the Voice of Dalit International, a group which campaigns for the rights of former Untouchables.

“I find some people who are heavily involved in promoting racial equality, they are fighting campaigns to promote equality in Indian and English people, but the same people, when it comes to their brothers and sisters they are the people who are promoting caste discrimination of their own people”

Davinder Prasad recalls one key incident in his local city Coventry which involved a booklet under the guidance of local councillor

“I wouldn't name the person but he is a Brahmin councillor who was the chairman of the social equality department of Coventry City Council. This booklet `A guide to minority ethnic customs religions and aiming systems in Coventry's was issued by his department in 1995/96. Now it describes the Hindu caste system `Caste is inherited by birth and one cannot change or leave one's caste. Hindus in Britain may wish to observe the caste system and wish to avoid dining and intermarriage with members of other castes'. It's unbelievable this booklet was coming out of Coventry City Council - a government agency. If this was published in any Indian government department or office the head of the department there would have had to resign”.

That draft booklet was eventually withheld and Coventry City Council issued an apology. The councillor in question who devised the text of the booklet, Prashotam Lal Joshi, was not placed on any disciplinary action. But when we contacted Mr Joshi with regards to the incident, he began by saying he regretted the decision to make a reference to the caste system:

“I regret that because that has done a lot of harm on the way things are developing people belonging to higher caste are placed in a very difficult position. When I was a councillor a document was produced where there was only very small reference towards

Untouchables and they created the allegations. These castes have become very sensitive; they're very vocal. Difficulty in defence that lot can be said but there are very few people that have come forward”.

[Recording of children playing in playground.]

The emphasis on cultural diversity has nowadays led to schools like this one teaching as many as four or five religions to its pupils. Hinduism is one of the religions taught as part of the curriculum at secondary school. Students are given an introduction to the main caste groups within the Hindu tradition and taught that a hereditary system where birth determines one's place in society. Many former Untouchables such as Davinder Prasad find this extremely uncomfortable:

“It is very unfortunate. My children come home and ask me `What are we?” and I have to explain to them that we are not in the caste system and it confuses them because as a part of that national curriculum in schools as a part of Hinduism children are being taught about their position in the caste system. Unfortunately, our people, most of them, were illiterate, they did not have any clue about government education systems and first generation Asians, particularly those of the high caste educated back in India, they had a change to get involved with formulation of schools' curriculum's and schools educational policies. Somebody has knowingly done this and we want to undo it”.

We asked the Department for Education for a response about the continuing presence of caste in the national curriculum but they declined to comment directly on the issue. However, they wish to point out that recent introduction to citizenship as a subject on the national curriculum, pupils are given a distinct opportunity to develop an understanding of the nature of prejudice but many like Judith Brown believe that it is the responsibility of those within the British Indian community to bring about change in educational policy:

“It is in a sense, up to Hindu communities of Britain to put pressure on those who make the national curriculum. It is very difficult if people who are outside the tradition have to try to describe it without help from those inside. The problem with Untouchables, that even here in Britain they tend to have come from such deprived backgrounds in India, it takes a while before they are in a position to be able to exercise clout and leverage in the public sphere.”

[Recording of bhangra music.]

In today's multicultural Britain it may be hard to believe caste can exert such a powerful influence. The values of meritocracy are at the heart of contemporary British society – values that most people believe that whatever their background they can succeed through their own efforts. And many within the British Indian community believe that a classless society cannot truly exist when a caste system is in place. But Bhikhu Parekh sees no contradiction here. He believes that it's possible to subscribe to the notion of meritocracy and still retain a caste identity:

“The evolution of caste here is proceeding along the same lines as caste in India. Caste becomes more like a civic association; a network of from where you can get capital, a network where from you can get your clients if you are setting up a business, a network of people who will canvass for you in local or national elections. Full stop. In other words what people are now doing with the caste system, they want to get rid of its unacceptable dimensions like restrictions of marriage or dining. Take full advantage of and immobilise its full potentialities which will stand them in good stead in country and therefore caste in some form is bound to stay for a long time because people see advantages in it. And I can see that it is a good rational negotiating strategy”.

However, other such as Suresh Grover remains spectacle about this kind of rational strategy. He feels that unless caste prejudice is recognised as a form of institutional discrimination, it will remain a potent form of racism within the Asian community

“No form of behaviour which deliberately leads to people being marginalised and treated as subhuman should be tolerated by a society which believes in universal rights. The reason why it has been that good because there isn’t an understanding of multicultural there isn’t an understanding of pluralist living and thought in our community. People see Indian communities as homogeneous, one form of religion, one form of ideas. Those notions have to be destroyed. So if there has got be a relationship between the British State and the Asian community, that understanding has to be that we believe in human rights. So the Government are judged by it and held accountable. But also those who say they are leaders of the Asian community are tested on the same basis to see if they offer universal rights to others and that should be the measure of their understanding of racism in this country. Not simply dealing with the issue of white racism but dealing with prejudice and discrimination within their own communities”.

But for Davinder Prasad and the many others, who have traditionally been outcaste by Indian society, gradual institutional change may be too slow in coming. As they enjoy unprecedented affluence and move up the economic and educational hierarchy look forward to a Britain where a caste system cannot survive.

“We can survive ourselves. We have got our own places of worship. We are trying to re-discover our own history and we will not be bullied or dictated by high caste people. This is the thing some of the high caste people are finding it difficult to accept. But I tell you, this will happen in the future, and they won’t have a choice. This century is going to be our opportunity. We will have qualification, we will have education. With education we will have power. This century is going to be our century.

[Flute playing.]

END