

my status was compared to their status, they were living in a council house they didn't even own and I was on the calibre of living on Kenilworth Road compared to them. Where they were only earning £10,000, I was earning £60,000. I said 'Don't show status, I am taking your daughter for what she is, why are you trying to show me that I am at the bottom and you're at the top. If you start weighing these things up, we're not, it's the other way round but I treat you equally.' They replied 'No no it's never going to be on.'

We went against their family and got married and she was disowned. She was disowned by the whole family, her sisters, mum and dad, the brother, everybody. The brother said 'Anybody meet her I'm going to disown you whether it be any of the sisters.' It carried on for about four or five years. Slowly over the time, six or seven years, the sisters started meeting her and slowly slowly she did start meeting all the sisters. After about twelve years the mother was really scared, really scared to meet my wife because of her son was not going to allow it. And we used to go out to meet at private places where he would not know that we met her.

The real crunch came twenty-two to twenty-three years on, which was six months ago. My wife's mother was diagnosed with terminal cancer and she was given three months to live. This was at the beginning of this year. When she was given three months to live we thought ok, doesn't matter what our difference are, doesn't matter what our casteing is, he is a human being. As a human being we are asking you, she has got terminal cancer, she is too ill to go out of the house, the last few months all we say is can we see her before she dies. And [voice choked]. Even up to that point he said no [voice choked with tears]. Even at that point he said 'No, you are not allowed to see her, if she gets out of the house, and she meets someone else, you can meet her at her *mama's* [wife's maternal uncle] house but you can't meet her at our house.' She [mother-in-law] made about two attempts to go to my wife's *mama's* house where we met her and those were the last two times we met her in the three months. She passed away about two months ago. When it came to the funeral, when the body came back to the house, everybody was allowed at the house, he told his sisters that he did not want her [my wife] anywhere near the body. He said 'She is not allowed to pay her respects, tell her to go away.' Over that time, I was really really furious. I told my wife that we are going to the house, we're going to see her. We won't go into the house; we'll wait outside. Even right up to the time that she was cremated, he did not want us anywhere near. He still felt as he did twenty-four years ago. He said 'Untouchable is still an Untouchable. You are Untouchable yesterday, today, you'll always be Untouchable, and nothing is going to change you in my eyes. No matter how big you become, how well off you might become, once a *choora*, always a *choora*'.

She passed away and we thought, 'That's it' we don't want anything from him any more 'We don't need to know him anymore.'

And it has taken this long, but it has only been in the last few years that I've realised that even after times like this, nothing has changed, we are still discriminated against. I doesn't matter what we become, it doesn't matter how big we become, once an Untouchable, always an Untouchable. So I'm really glad this [CasteWatchUK] has been set up today as a stepping stone for many other events to come to try wipe out this discrimination. I know we can't really wipe this out, but to educate people, our new generation, and our future generation to come, to think very sensibly and not only think about today but tomorrow. Twenty-three years ago, I did not think about what would still happen twenty-three years later.

place for the choora people. I ignored him and walked on, although I could have rammed my fist down his gob.

After the Easter holidays I had two GCSE exams to take – Maths and Technology. At about 11.30 we all had to queue up to take the exam. I was with my mates talking when suddenly I saw Hardeep running towards me holding an umbrella up high. Before I could do anything he whacked it across my head. I was a little shocked but I grabbed hold of it [the umbrella] and pulled him to the ground and gave him a good slap. The teachers came, but too late as usual and they didn't see any of it. I was again seen as the violent one even though I had a big cut on my forehead. My dad was called in once more and they said it was urgent. The Year Head spoke to my dad and said that it was important for me to sit my exams. I could not concentrate and would not have given my best. I decided to go home and took a painkiller for my head. I missed the first two papers of GCSE exams.

My mum and dad were shopping in Sainsburys one day. Hardeep's family was there. They followed us from isle to isle. I could hear them saying 'He's the one' and were looking at us in a bad way but didn't do anything.

I believe people like Hardeep and his family should be punished for making other people's lives a misery. They are racists and a jealous family full of hatred and it is them that are back-ward thinking and corrupt. I think they should be made an example of.

### **Pali, 41, businessman**

My experience..... I'm now 41 years old. Since from early years at school I've actually grown up in Foleshill where it is actually the heart of all Asians. I've always heard remarks like Untouchable and *choora* and these sorts of names. As a little kid I never took note. I thought when people said he is Untouchable I must be a superior person, you can't touch me. I honestly didn't realise what it actually meant. So I never took these things to heart until I was about 14. I actually went into doing music and meeting people from different communities and different people. We started playing at weddings and occasions. It was sometimes at wedding people give you money and that – when they actually come up and put money on stage I heard some snide comments like 'Don't give them money, they are *choore*, they are *chamar*, don't bother giving them money, they are beggars'. It was only then that I started noticing people still carry these sorts of things on.

The main thing for me, when it really hit me hard was when I was 17 years old. I met what was then my girlfriend but she's my wife now. Now obviously, I am what is known as an Untouchable, a Valmiki, bottom of the casteing range. And my girlfriend was a *jat*. I thought no problem, we love each other, and it shouldn't be a problem at all. We'll talk to the family; we'll be civilised. We're talking 23-24 years this sort of thing was very unheard off. Just meeting and love marriages.

We approached the family; there is only one brother and 5 sisters all together. When we approached the family, the brother was furious and he took hold of my girlfriend and locked her in the house and didn't let her go anywhere. Anytime she had to go anywhere; she had to be chaperoned. My father tried meeting up with their family but they said 'Don't come to our house you're Untouchable, we don't even want you near our doorstep, we don't want any of your family there.' We said 'Look come to ours.' They said 'No way, we will never come to an Untouchable's house.'

We tried to compromise and meet on neutral ground and we tried to talk to them. Talking was totally out of the question and I, at that point, stood my ground and said 'Look what is wrong with me. I don't understand. I'm a hardworking person, I haven't got a criminal record.' If you really look at what

were a dirty tribe in India and were also called Untouchable. This happened every time my friend and I talked. He said it in front of some of my other mates. This made me feel ashamed because they actually started to ask me if it was true when I was not sure what it meant. They all laughed at me.

This was a very upsetting time for me and my family because my dadi ma [grandma] was sick and dying from cancer and did not need hassle from anyone. I spoke to my dad that evening and told him what had happened and my dad told me to ignore him [Hardeep] and told me to tell the tutor if it didn't stop. He also said that he would go and speak to the teachers. I wanted to know the exact meaning of the word choora. My parents said they were not sure but they thought that in the olden times in India, the other people from other castes gave this name to very poor people who would do any job no matter how dirty it was. They also said that caste names were given to people for the type of work they did for a living. My parents told me that I am a Valmiki and that I should hold my head up high and be proud of it because it is part of my identity. Hardeep carried on making my life a misery by whispering it [choora] when he walked by, laughing at me when I spoke in class as part of a discussion. On the last day of school before we broke up for summer holidays, Hardeep followed my friend and I through the park. He punched my friend in the face and gave him a nosebleed. I grabbed Hardeep by the neck and gave him a few hard punches. He too started bleeding and got up and ran away but saying 'You watch what happens to you, you bastard choora'.

Early that Saturday morning a loud shattering sound was heard from outside. We all ran out and saw that my dad's car windscreen was smashed. A brick was in the back seat and we saw a car drive off real fast and I could see the car belonged to Hardeep's family because I had seen his dad drop him off at school. The police were called and all the usual stuff happened. I told the police I thought the car belonged to Hardeep's family. When the office heard Hardeep's family surname and the address he said that they were a very difficult family and that there were problems with neighbours and he had found the father very unhelpful. The police made checks on Hardeep's family and they said that it was I that had assaulted their son in the park before the school holiday and they wanted to press charges. I was made to go to the police station and answer to the sergeant. I was let off because I explained that Hardeep is a racist and that he got a kick out of provoking me. Hardeep was cautioned by the police because my friend gave the same story.

It carried on from September to late December. I kept out of Hardeep's way although I noticed that he kept giving me 'V' signs and whispering the word choora to me. Early in January 2004 my grandma sadly passed away and I went into school to hand in some coursework. All my mates gathered around me to say how sorry they were to hear about my grandma. Hardeep was in class and watching me and laughed. He came over and said 'so you're grandmas died, oh what a shame, the poor choori is gone'. I was raging with anger I just grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and carried on punching him. The teacher held me back. He [teacher] took me aside and heard my story. We [Hardeep and I] were both excluded for a week. I was seen as a troublemaker by the school and some of the parent governors. My dad and I were once again asked to see the year of head. He told my dad that violence would not be tolerated by the school. My dad listened for a long time and became quite angry and told the year head that I was not violent. I was provoked to take the action that I took. He also told my dad that I would not be given the chance to stop over to stay in sixth form college and I had ruined my chance to go the leaving prom which was a big thing for me because all my mates were going to it and it may have been the last time all of us met before leaving. The day after the prom, everybody said that it had been a great night and everybody had gone except me. Hardeep was standing near by and he said it served me right because it was his plan to get me into trouble with the teachers so that they would stop me from going. He started his rubbish again. He said it was not a

### **Sheila, 24, MA Student**

As we all know, casteism is an issue, which is forever growing in our lives, yet casteism is seldom acknowledged in law, the Race Relations Act, in literature and in research.

I am currently conducting research that aims to account the personal experiences of British Asian people that have been subjected to caste discrimination. The motivation behind my research was actually led by my own personal experiences of being a so-called low caste.

When I discovered my caste, it changed my life completely. I actually believed that I was inferior. At secondary school, my peers knew about my caste before I did and this was evident in name-calling such as choori and chamari and rejection from social and group activities. I didn't understand why I was being treated like this until I asked what choori and chamari meant. After learning that our family derived from this background it all made sense to me and I realised why people treated me the way they did. The so-called high caste people would make references to their caste and be proud of it whereas I tried to hide and conceal it. But the underlying fact was that caste mattered to them and it mattered to me at that point. Because they were higher than me it gave them a sense of significance and power over me because it suited them. In their position, I probably would have done the same. I wanted to be like them. But now things have changed and I don't feel the same as I did back then.

About six months ago I was in an Indian sweet shop in Leicester and the owner boasted about being a Brahman and he said that he was higher than me and that was a God-proven fact. There was no arguing with him because he was so ignorant and so fixated with the idea of being higher. I just walked out.

Another example is the previous owner of my off-licence store assumed that I was a jat and he was in total disbelief when he discovered my caste when he sold the shop to me. He said that he was the highest caste ever and people like me worked on his farm in India. He said being a landowner made him superior to me. I found this really funny as he sold his land to me. I then told him to get out of my shop.

But, I think the straw that broke the camel's back was an incident that happened about a month ago. I was serving a customer at my shop and this customer was of a so-called high caste background who constantly questioned me about my caste. This lady refuses to put money in my hand, like I am an Untouchable. Instead, she slams the money on the counter and tells me to put the change in the charity box. This has happened to me on many occasions now and the next time this happens, I will refuse to accept her custom until she puts money in my hand.

The underlying fact is that my research and my experiences proves that casteism still affects our lives and still will if we don't root it out without challenging it.

### **Surbjit, 17, just finished school**

I first heard the word choora at school at the age of 15 years. I was confused and angry because it had to mean something bad for it be said to me time after time. This abuse started when I became friendly with a Sikh boy in my class. He had a cousin who is also in our class. The cousin was about the same height, build and weight as me. His hair was long and tied up in a knot and covered with a small piece of dark cloth. The boy was called Hardeep. He always told the other kids in the class, the white kids, that he was a true Sikh and a true Indian warrior prince. One day at recess, he saw my friend and I were having a joke and we were laughing so much, he came across and told my friend to stay away from me and also told him that I was a choora and that his dad had told him that chooras