

'big in the UK'

'We want to make people realise they don't have to accept this'

By Ali Hussain

Indian migration into the UK has influenced the landscape of British cultural life for over 50 years, but the Indian caste system is one import that is at loggerheads with some of Britain's core values.

Though many British Indians would deny that caste plays any significant role in their lives, the system still exerts a profound influence on the UK's south-Asian communities say CasteWatchUK, an organisation set up to raise awareness of caste discrimination in Britain today.

CasteWatchUK, a voluntary organisation, held its first major conference in Coventry earlier this month, with guest speakers MP Bob Ainsworth of Coventry North-east and Warwick University lecturer Dr Eleanor Nesbitt. Discussion centred on the various manifestations of British caste discrimination and ways to tackle it. There were also calls for the inclusion of a caste discrimination factor in the Equality Bill.

There are many examples of caste discrimination in the UK, said Pashori Lal, Chairman of CasteWatchUK. He described one individual who spoke out during a CasteWatchUK workshop in Southall last year. "This individual had just come over from India and had a surname that belonged to a caste higher than the one to which he belonged," said Lal. "Based on his name, the people he was staying with offered him all the help they could give him - found him a job, supported and encouraged him."

"A few months later, however, during conversation, it came out that he was actually of a lower caste than his name suggested and as soon as this was known he received a cold shoulder. It was a complete rejection. All of a sudden, he had lost the support he had come to rely on, lost his job and ended up looking for a place to stay."

Lal insisted that this is not just an isolated case, and described caste as a problem of "great significance" in the UK. "It's a problem that affects the majority of south-Asian communities here," he said.

"Despite this, people have been reluctant to deal with the issue because of political correctness and feeling they may offend people. Caste discrimination is not something that can be defended by either religion or culture in any society."

Lal believes that as the issue of caste discrimination is given a greater profile, more people who have suffered in silence will come forward. "What we want to do is make this more open and make people realise they don't have to accept this kind of thing in the UK," said Lal.

Dr Eleanor Nesbitt is a senior lecturer at the University of Warwick specialising in British Hinduism and Sikhism, and has carried out fieldwork over the past 20 years among young people of South-Asian backgrounds in the Midlands. "There is evidence, even among young children, of negative caste stereotypes," she told India Weekly. "It's as much among Sikhs as it is among Hindus."

Nesbitt said that though it was difficult to draw a line between seeing caste as a cultural or a religious phenomenon, she believed this was far more of a south-Asian cultural phenomenon which permeates throughout British south Asian communities.

"It is not just a Hindu thing," she stressed. "It's sad this kind of practice has persisted in a society where the least advantaged **jaath** [caste] can be surgeons and barristers, and people from the highest caste can have the least prestigious jobs. There is actually no connection between present-day reality and traditional notions of caste, except in as far as people are perpetuating prejudices that are rooted in historical scenarios of discrimination and privilege."

Not everyone shares CasteWatchUK's concerns and some believe the issue has been exaggerated. "This will become a problem only if it is brought up," argued Anil Bhanot of the Hindu Council UK. "I'm not sure that it's actually a problem here. There may, of course, be a small group of very orthodox people in certain castes that stick together, but I'm not sure why someone would take this issue up to this extent."

"As far as I can see, caste divisions are dying out. My son, for example, wouldn't really understand it. Even in my own family, I've got three cousins who have married between castes," Bhanot added.

The Hindu Council UK has been pressuring the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to take the caste focus in teaching Hinduism out of the curriculum. "It is not necessary anymore, so there's no point in highlighting it," said Bhanot.

However, he argued that though caste may be dying out as a way of defining social hierarchy, the caste system in itself was not necessarily such a bad thing.

Bhanot suggested that the way we see caste today is very different from the way caste functioned in the early days of Hinduism, when it was much less rigid and draconian.

"In the past, it was easy to interchange caste, for example," he said. "Take the **Ramayana** - it was written by the sage Valmiki, who was from a low caste, but because he had the ability to write the **Ramayana**, he was elevated to the status of a saint."

"Caste was not so set then - but things changed," he added.

Bimal Krishna Das, of the National Council of Hindu Temples, supported this idea of a distortion of the original principles of caste by modern advocates.

"The modern-day caste system is not part of Hinduism at all," he told **India Weekly**. "The word caste is one that has been given to us by the British 200 years ago, and both assumes and conveys an idea that has very little to do with the original principles mentioned in the Hindu/Vedic scriptures."

"The divisions described by the scriptures are not something you apply. They are naturally existing phenomena and they do not confine people to a certain fixed social position. What someone does depends on their abilities. If a person, who is classed as a labourer, acquires the **intelligence and ability** to become an intellectual, teacher or professor, he or she can do that. The same is true the other way round."

"The modern focus on what category you are born into is wrong, illogical and is not supported by the scriptures. It has become a very fixed system that has been exploited by individuals and societies to persecute and control."

Despite these modern-day distortions, Das does not believe caste is or should become a significant issue facing the British Indian community. "In the UK, the issue about caste is certainly a generational thing and will become less and less significant over time."

"I certainly don't hear from individuals complaining that they've been discriminated against on the basis of caste," he said.

"Obviously, there are discussions within the community about it and there are preferences when somebody gets married, but I don't think caste, in this day and age, plays a major criteria in deciding if one is getting married or not."

He added: "If anything, the biggest caste today is wealth, which causes many social evils of its own."