

Summer News Update 2020

Dear Members, Supporters and Friends,

Welcome to the Summer News Update 2020. In this issue we have collated the latest reports and events in the UK and overseas. While the news has been overshadowed by the Covid-19 pandemic, sadly there is no shortage of incidents of caste-based discrimination to report on. However, it's not all doom and gloom, and some significant progress has been made in raising caste issues, through the recent decision of the State of California to sue Cisco for caste-based discrimination, calling out marriage websites on their algorithms that allow caste preference to be made, or the decision of a number of companies to rename or discontinue skin-lightening products that reinforce the concept of colourism and casteism.

DSN-UK News

- Our new look website has now been launched, and already we have seen an increase in membership numbers as a result. If you haven't had a chance to check it out, you can find it [here](#).
- With the merger of the Foreign Commonwealth Office (FCO) and the Department for International Development (DfID), we are busy trying to establish how the new department will work and ensure that we continue to have a good relationship with the ministers and shadow ministers involved.
- We are delighted that a letter prepared to go out to peers and MPs on the repeal of the duty to include 'caste' in the 2010 Equality Act, has been endorsed by Liberty, Amnesty UK, Race on the Agenda, the Runnymede Trust and Stonewall. Events may have disrupted the timing of when these are sent out, but it is heartening to know that we have so much support from the Third Sector.
- The APPG for Dalits continue to do sterling work in raising the issue of caste-based discrimination. In June Lord Harries tabled a Parliamentary Question to ask HMG what steps they were taking to encourage companies to protect those in their supply chains from the effects of coronavirus.
- Our Director, Meena, has drafted a briefing highlighting the increasing negative effects on vulnerable and migrant workers in UK supply chains in South Asia, particularly those affected by caste discrimination. Several of those listed to speak referred to parts of the briefing. Read the [debate here](#).
- DSN-UK's work with the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) remains strong, despite meetings being virtual now, including our participation in the ETI NGO Caucus, where the main focus was discussion around 'A Just Transition Post-Covid'. We have also become involved in a small group focused on the changes to Indian Labour laws, and have endorsed ETI's [Call to Action](#).
- As usual, we are still contributing information to journalists who have been in touch over a number of issues relating to caste-based discrimination. Although a lot of the material is background, you can catch a quote from Meena in an article from [scroll.in](#).
- Meena was also a guest on a vitally important conversation on the renowned 'Indian Matchmaking', available on Netflix. This was a Livecast discussion on 'Caste and Colourism: Challenging the Standards for Love in Biased Societies', with the Executive Producer of Netflix's Indian Matchmaking, Smriti Mundhra, and Dalit activists Thenmozhi Soundarajan from Equality Labs and Christina Dhanaraj – author of 'Swipe me left I'm Dalit' from the book *Love is not a Word*. If you missed it, then do catch it [here](#). Or watch with comments on [FaceBook](#)
- Our Co-Chair, Dr Corinne Lennox, has published a new book: *Transnational Social Mobilisation and Minority Rights: Identity, Advocacy and Norms*. It compares the global movement of Dalits, people of African Descent, Roma and Indigenous Peoples, and explores the ways in which minority groups across the world are reshaping the international minority rights protection system. Congratulations on another excellent publication!

- We would also like to pass on our congratulations to Professor Meena Dhanda and Dr Annapurna Waughray on their participation in the Ambedkar King Study Circle discussion series (#5), which took place on 8 August. Meena spoke on '[An Unnameable Injustice: The Caste problem in the UK](#)', while Annapurna discussed '[Caste, discrimination and legal change in the UK](#)'. There was also an excellent [Q & A session](#), featuring both academics. Long-time supporter Dr Murali Shanmugavelan has already featured in the 1st series, with his session on '[Everyday Caste in Speech, Practice & Discrimination](#)'. Our thanks go out to all those who participated, for discussing such an important subject and representing the UK solidarity movement.

International News

- As is well documented, Dalits have suffered disproportionately whenever there have been crises – whether earthquakes, flooding, or pandemic. IDSN have made a [statement](#) highlighting the key issues and giving recommendations on how to minimise the effect on Scheduled Castes, and have endorsed an appeal by the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) aimed at the Indian Government.
- [All IDSN members in South Asia are engaged with supporting Dalit communities through the Covid-19 crisis](#) within their areas of expertise. Some are providing relief materials and humanitarian assistance to individuals and families who have lost their income overnight, others are raising awareness and providing protective equipment, and all are advocating for government attention and support to Dalits who are struggling to cope.
- IDSN member the National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ-NCDHR) has issued a press release detailing a wide range of atrocities against Dalits over the past months under the Covid-19 lockdown. NDMJ highlights that the lockdown has led to a surge in caste-based violence and atrocities and that access to justice for Dalits remains deeply flawed. The organisation has collected a wide range of case reports and has made interventions in these. NDMJ has also collated media reports documenting examples of the violations.
- The EU Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders, has announced that the EU Commission will introduce a legislative initiative next year on mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence for EU-based companies. If this legislation is introduced, EU companies can be held responsible for human rights violations in their supply chains.
- IDSN has fully endorsed the [Call to action on Labour Law changes in India](#), issued by the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI). The statement calls on businesses sourcing in India to respond to the news that several Indian states will suspend key fundamental labour rights for a period of up to three years, under the cover of the Covid-19 crisis.
- UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet expressed shock at the killing of five men by opponents of an inter-caste relationship in Nepal, as well as several other incidents of caste-based discrimination and violence that have taken place during the Covid-19 pandemic. A [joint statement](#) by the EU Delegation and EU Member States represented in Kathmandu was issued on 3 June, condemning violence based on caste and other grounds and expressing the EU's support to efforts undertaken to conduct a fair investigation leading to action to ensure justice and reparations for the victims and their families.
- A new report published by the human rights NGO Arisa has found that children under 14 years account for over 18% of the workforce in the cottonseed farms surveyed, with over 50% of the child labourers in the sector being Dalits or Adivasis. The report [Sowing Hope](#), which examines child labour and wages in cotton and vegetable seed production in India, says that while still too high, the total amount of child labourers has in fact declined since 2015, due to initiatives by companies and NGOs. The researchers also found differential treatment of Dalits in the workplace with reports of Dalit workers being treated differently to dominant castes and not being given the same privileges in relation to taking breaks during work hours or being treated with respect and dignity.

- Amnesty International (AI), Front Line Defenders (FLD), Human Rights Watch (HRW), IDSN, Minority Rights Group International (MRG), Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) and the World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT) have issued a joint letter calling on the EU to specifically address serious concerns for the safety and rights of human rights defenders in India, who have been increasingly targeted by the government.
- Dangerous working conditions, debt bondage and below minimum wages are some of the findings of the study '[Between a rock and a hard place](#)' released by the Dutch-based human rights NGO Arisa. In the quarries surveyed in Rajasthan, it was found that over 60% of the workers were Adivasis or Dalits.
- The need for more attention to be paid to intersectional caste and gender discrimination and for transforming mindsets through human rights education and awareness raising, was highlighted at the UN multi-stakeholder hearing 'Accelerating the Realization of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of all Women and Girls' on 21 July. Dalit women activists from India and Nepal took part in the hearing aimed at taking stock of the outcomes and recommendations of the 25-year review processes, including the 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women.

Australia

A number of [Australian Sikh organisations](#) have demanded an investigation and reply to complaints raised by Nihangs about caste-based segregation in Amrit Sanchar in Punjab and other states of India. As part of a baptism ceremony, the Majhbi and Ramdassia Singhs have been given a separate bowl to drink from than that of Jatt Sikhs, and the Mazhabi Sikhs are barred from performing 'selfless service' like cooking or doing manual labour for the community, because 'they look dirty'. Caste should have no place in Sikhism, and so a committee is to be created to address this issue, along with taking the matter to the World Sikh Parliament.

Bangladesh

Between 1-1.5 million of Bangladesh's street sweepers are Dalit, and during the current pandemic [their lives have been put at significant risk](#). Whilst directives from both central and local governments have supposedly ensured PPE for these workers, there is no evidence that this has actually occurred, or that the PPE provided has been of sufficient quality. Even prior to the pandemic, working conditions have often been extremely hazardous – not only do cleaners often have to collect waste with bare hands, no boots and a high risk of roadside accidents, but there is a higher incidence of a wide range of illnesses. Once you combine a weaker immune system with the threat of contracting Covid-19 from dealing with hospital waste and sewage, the Dalit community is at greater risk, especially considering the close living quarters many live in. Currently it appears that the street sweepers are as disposable as the PPE they are allegedly being supplied with.

The Gambia

The [National Human Rights Commission](#) has expressed concern about the alleged fine and banishment imposed on a resident of [Garawol village](#) in the Upper River Region, apparently for leading a supposed slave class in prayers. Sadly, the HRC has expressed a number of concerns about discriminatory practices against the Sarahuleh community, where members are commonly referred to as 'slaves'. Since October 2019, the NHRC has conducted two fact-finding missions, and discovered that long-standing traditional practice subjects this minority to tedious and sometimes degrading jobs, and in some cases physical attack, despite legislation being in place to protect them. The NHRC has urged the government to take [urgent action to eradicate the caste system](#) and other discriminatory practices which dehumanise people in various parts of The Gambia.

India

The coronavirus pandemic and lockdown has seen an increased number of attacks on Dalits, with the National Dalit Movement for Justice (NDMJ) reporting a 72% increase in April and May, compared to the same two months in 2019. In the southern state of Tamil Nadu, the NGO Evidence recorded a five-fold increase. During the pandemic Dalits have been accused of spreading the coronavirus and some upper-caste Hindus have taken advantage of the relative lawlessness wrought by the pandemic to settle old scores. 'Dalits are perceived as unclean, due to their roles as sanitation workers and leather workers, and therefore they are seen as carriers of viruses,' said Ritesh Pandey, leader of the opposition BSP: 'Crimes against Dalits have increased during the lockdown because a lot of people have gone back to their villages where there is competition for resources and land dispute issues.'

The Indian government has created the [narrative of 'Corona Warriors'](#) during the current Covid-19 pandemic, a term used for doctors, health and sanitation workers. But there seems to be a huge difference between the rhetoric and the reality for those working in sanitation. The government announced a Rs 1 crore (around £100,000) insurance coverage for all these workers, and a compensation of Rs 50 lakhs (around £50,000) for the families of those who died of the coronavirus contracted during work. However, those in sanitation have been repeatedly denied these payments. This comes on top of a high numbers of lay-offs, sub-standard PPE, late payment of salaries and a disturbingly low incentive bonus compared to others working in health. The government needs to take on board that [legislation is not being sufficiently implemented](#) to assist those at greatest risk.

Respect for the dead is an assumed fundamental right, but Dalits are being denied this in a village in Gujarat, where the Dalit cemetery was recently flooded with re-directed sewer water by so-called 'higher caste' residents. To add insult to injury, the local government has yet to intervene. Sadly, this is not the first time that this has happened. In 2001 a child's body was exhumed with a tractor because the burial plot was deemed too close to private land; in Uttar Pradesh, a woman's body was taken off a funeral pyre because it was argued that she shouldn't be buried in communal land. Dalits are often denied access to village burial grounds, forcing them to use wasteland instead.

On a positive note, Social Media Matters and Spectrum Labs launched a behaviour identification model in April that detects caste discrimination on social media platforms, including status updates, messages, tweets and comments. Its aim is to recognise and respond to toxicity immediately before it evolves into a bigger problem. Initially, the model is trained to work with several languages - English, Hindi, and Hindi-English mix - and it will be upgraded further. Justin Davis, CEO at Spectrum Labs quoted, 'The hardest part of building an AI model that can effectively detect caste discrimination online is really defining and understanding not only what caste discrimination is, but also what it is not.'

Nepal

Nepal enacted the Caste-based Discrimination and Untouchability Act in 2011, yet in the following 9 years and 75 cases that have been brought, [not a single maximum sentence](#) has been handed down by the courts, including the 20 cases of murder of Dalits by non-Dalits. The majority of those killed were the result of conflict with so-called 'higher caste' members due to falling in love with someone outside their own caste, entering temples or tea shops, or simply because they happened to touch public taps. Even accusations of witchcraft have resulted in death. While the maximum sentence for caste-based discrimination is 3 years, the only prison sentences handed down have been for 3 months and 6 months. This is an appalling indictment of the Nepali attitude towards caste, further compounded by the fact that many cases are never brought to court because of lack of hard evidence of caste motivation. While the legislation was a solid step forward for the country, until it is actually put into practice there will be no deterrent to the continuing practice of caste-based discrimination.

Back in May, six young Dalit men were murdered in [Rukum](#). One of the men was dating a girl of a higher caste, much to her family's disapproval. When he went to get her [to elope](#), taking several friends with him, the group were attacked. While 12 of the group were injured, 6 others went missing and were later found in a nearby river. A parliamentary committee found that there were severe lapses in protocol on the part of local authorities: despite the men being reported missing, the police did nothing to find them; the accused were not arrested until after criticism was made over the police's handling of the case; and the autopsy was carried out by the son of the lawyer of one of the accused, leading to doubts over its authenticity. The Dalit Commission provided a full report to the government and made several suggestions to improve its handling of such cases. But the government's lax attitude is highlighted by the fact that the Dalit Commission doesn't even have an office to work out of.

On the same day that the six men were killed in Rukum, [a 12-year-old girl was found hanging from a tree](#). Her death was originally considered suicide, provoked by enduring rape by a 25-year-old man and community leaders then deciding that the perpetrator should marry her as his 'punishment'. Originally the police had refused to register the case, only relenting once murder had been alleged. Human Rights Watch have registered their concern that the role of local politicians in both cases have 'lead to obstruction of justice'. Already, many rape cases against Dalits are either not reported to police or are not registered by them.

Pakistan

The [New York Times](#) has featured a hard-hitting article on Christian Dalits in Pakistan. As descendants of lower-caste Hindus who converted to Christianity in order to escape caste-based discrimination, they are still marginalised, as highlighted by a recent newspaper advertisement for sewer sweepers which insisted that only Christians should apply. In fact, Christians make up 80% of this workforce, (the rest being mostly lower-caste Hindus), despite only making up 1.6% of the population. And with high levels of illiteracy and the risk of being accused of blasphemy, there is little organisation amongst them to change things. Doctors often refuse to treat them, they are called '*choora*' or dirty, and are forced to live in segregated areas. Sadly, as manual scavenging is still vital to keeping the sewer systems flowing, the Pakistani government has little impetus to improve things for them.

[Disadvantaged Hindus in Pakistan](#) are angry about the recently formed National Commission for Minorities (NCM), where the country's schedule caste communities have been ignored in proposed nominations. According to some, while the scheduled caste communities form the majority of the Hindu population, census numbers have not reflected this, with some members of the community claiming that their numbers have been deliberately shown as less. And because they were not considered a large enough group, they have not been provided with a suitable share of the development budget. Instead they have been grouped together under the title of 'Hindus', with the Muslim majority population unaware of the sensitivity involved.

USA

It's been difficult to ignore the big news coming out of America: that the State of California Department for Equality and Housing (DFEH) is taking tech giant Cisco to court over alleged caste-based discrimination in the workplace. You can find our article on it [here](#), but the news has been extensively covered, and has encouraged discussion on the problems found amongst the diaspora, [particularly in Silicon Valley](#). Furthermore, it has become fairly obvious that [globalisation and liberalisation](#) haven't ended caste-based discrimination, and market forces are not enough to deter corporations from allowing it to happen. Hence the need for governments to step in and take legislative measures.

Sadly, Cisco isn't the only tech giant accused of caste-based discrimination. Three months before the Cisco suit, a former employee filed [a lawsuit against HCL America](#), the US unit of the Indian IT major

HCL Technologies, for unlawful termination based on his caste by his superior. The accuser alleges that his superior, a Kamma Naidu by caste, harboured animosity against him, a Kapu Naidu. The two groups have a history of rivalry that could date back to the riots in 1980s in the Vijayawada region of Andhra Pradesh, where over 40 people died, the lawsuit said. The arbitration case is set to be heard in April 2021.

Also hitting the headlines is [Netflix's 'Indian Matchmaking'](#), a programme that has appalled the Indian diaspora in America and created a flurry of opinion pieces on its attitude towards caste. As Dalit author [Yashica Dutt](#) says: '*Indian Matchmaking* doesn't deserve criticism for holding up a mirror to the diaspora's uncomfortable realities. It deserves scrutiny because it promotes a practice that has enabled caste to live, breathe, and mutate over centuries.'

Yemen

It is often forgotten that [caste systems exist outside of South Asia](#), but a recent article spurred by the Black Lives Matter movement, has highlighted the caste-based discrimination suffered by the [Muhamasheen](#). Whilst making up between 2-10% of the population, children are treated differently in schools, racial slurs meaning 'slave' or 'servant' are thrown at them and they have the highest level of unemployment in the country, often forced to work as street sweepers and garbage collectors. And while the BLM movement has attracted attention around the world, black Yemenis have received no support as the country struggles with civil war. The president of the National Union of the Marginalised summed it up succinctly: 'Unfortunately, the situation in Yemen will remain the same because of these complicated social and tribal structures, in which discrimination is embedded and based on tribe, region and religion.'