

Winter Newsletter 2021

Dear Members, Supporters and Friends,

Welcome to the Winter News Update 2021. As usual, our newsletter covers the latest reports and events in the UK and overseas. Whilst headlines have been focused on the Covid-19 pandemic - with short interludes to cover Brexit - there has still been plenty to report in terms of human rights and caste-based discrimination. Particularly with the surge in interest in the Black Lives Matter movement, we hope that the campaign to end caste-based discrimination can reach a similar momentum.

DSN-UK News

- In light of the constant barrage of claims that caste-based discrimination doesn't exist in the UK, we have launched the [Everyday Casteism campaign](#), which aims to collect information from members of the public on incidences of casteism, whether minor (such as name-calling) or more serious (such as threats of violence). If you, or someone you know, has experienced caste-based discrimination in the UK, please contact us using the link above. You can remain anonymous, and we hope that this body of evidence can be put towards proving that there is still much to be done in tackling the issue.
- Our thanks go out to the members of the APPG for Dalits for keeping caste-based discrimination on the agenda. There have been a number of Parliamentary Questions (PQs) laid down, including that by Lord Alton of Liverpool in December, asking about what discussions Her Majesty's Government have had with the Indian government about '(a) the reported marginalisation of the Dalit community, in particular Dalit sanitation workers, and (b) the level of poverty among religious minority groups in that country'. In his reply, Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon responded that 'The UK continuously assesses the human rights situation in India. We oppose discrimination against minorities because of caste, religion or belief'. The APPG has also continued to build their relationship with the APPG for Pakistani Minorities.
- Our Director Meena Varma participated in an event on [Caste in the Diaspora](#) organised by The Rights Collective. This is a group of South Asian womxn looking to tackle the distinct and often subtle ways in which disempowerment, inequality, trauma and harm manifests within the South Asian diaspora community in the UK. Meena was the last of the speakers featured, and pointed out that caste goes wherever the South Asian Diaspora go, and that we still need to break down the walls of 'untouchability'.
- The BOND Caste and Development group continue to work towards raising awareness of caste-based discrimination within global supply chains, and our thanks go out to Nadia Saracini for the amazing contribution she has made towards keeping the group going under difficult circumstances. The group has continued to meet and discuss how best to move forward in meeting the goals set out, including raising awareness of the development and human rights impacts of caste and the need for effective responses among the development community; building capacities of Bond members to analyse and address caste in their programmes and operations by serving as a forum for exchange and dissemination of evidence and learning; and planning joint advocacy when appropriate in the UK and

internationally, for the passage and implementation of policies and frameworks for the recognition and eradication of caste.

- We are delighted to have met with the Law Commission to discuss the issue of casteism in relation to 'hate crime'. The Law commission's review is currently in the stage of consultation, and particularly relevant to DSN-UK as they are looking into whether potential protected characteristics (such as caste) should be included as a motivation towards hate crime, and the practicalities of amending the law. We have submitted a report to the Law Commission, and look forward to seeing their progress.

International

- Executive Director Meena Varma took part in a [livecast discussion of Caste and Colourism](#) in August, in part because of the fall-out created by the Netflix show 'Indian Matchmaking', a reality TV programme on arranged marriages. The show was criticised for focusing on mainly Hindu dominant caste participants, and for promoting the ideas of 'fair skin colour' for a greater desirability. The other members of the panel were the Executive Producer of the show, Smriti Mundhra; Director of Equality Labs, Thenmozhi Soundarajan; and activist Christina Dhanaraj. Complaints were made that the issues of casteism and colourism were never addressed in the show, and that a bias towards 'higher' castes was evident.
- The [UN Minority Asia-Pacific Regional Forum](#) took place in October this year, with IDSN contributing towards the event. Human rights defenders from Nepal, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh referred to the need for safer online and off-line spaces for marginalised communities, making reference to the high levels of bullying and the way that hate speech is often escalated to hate crime. Similarly, IDSN also participated in the European Regional Forum on 'Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities', giving suggestions as to how the issue should be dealt with in Europe.
- Following the two regional forums, IDSN delivered several statements at the [2020 UN Forum on Minority Issues](#), covering 'Hate Speech, Social Media and Minorities'. Ritwajit Das, representing IDSN, explained both the positive and negative aspects of social media for Dalits, giving them a space to engage but leaving them open to abuse. IDSN made a number of recommendations, including that caste should be included as a protected characteristic in all covenants related to hate-speech and human rights, and that caste-hate speech is distinctive and merits attention by international forums.
- Ritwajit Das also represented IDSN at the [European Union NGO Forum](#), taking part as a member of the Keynote Panel on the subject of Fundamental Rights and Freedoms in the Digital Sphere. The Forum was concentrating on how the EU could further foster human rights compliance in the Digital Sphere and seize the potential of new technologies to promote the protection of human rights for all. Rit gave six recommendations on actions that could be taken, a necessity arising from the fact that caste-hate speech is rapidly increasing online, inciting violence, particularly against women.
- Congratulations to the [Dalit Solidarity Network Finland](#), who celebrated their 10th anniversary in November. The event was marked by participants from Nepal, India, the UK and many parts of Finland itself, with the keynote address given by Heidi Hautala, Finnish MEP and Vice-President of the European Parliament. Lauri Lind, former member of the DSNFi board and Ambassador Pertti Anttinen also contributed, along with Meena Varma.
- Norway's Ethical Trading Initiative held an event in December on 'Modern Slavery Stakeholder Dialogue and Caste in Global Supply Chains, Case India'. Covering a wide range of topics, Meena was quoted as saying 'There is very little awareness of rights and remedies

among Dalit workers and even where there is awareness, impunity and serious obstacles to obtaining justice due to deeply ingrained caste discrimination are rife as is employment discrimination'. It was also great to see the [Caste in Global Supply Chains](#) document, produced by ETI and drafted by IDSN and DSN-UK, being highly recommended to all stakeholders.

BANGLADESH

A spotlight has been held up to the way that [Bangladesh's sanitation workers](#) have been treated during the Covid-19 pandemic. With the usual problems of having to work without adequate safety equipment, despite Dhaka South City Corporation's chief waste management officer claiming that it had provided masks and gloves to all of their 5400 employees, they are only suitable for one-time use and often sub-standard. As in India, visibility and praise is given to doctors and police officers, but street-cleaners go under the radar. Adding to the already high-risk of contracting the virus during their work, poverty means that they often live in highly congested spaces shared with family members, where population density makes safe distancing impossible. As 1-1.5 million of Bangladesh's street-cleaners are Dalit, whether Hindu or Muslim, and lack political representation, these essential workers often fall through the gaps.

INDIA

Perhaps the appalling report about the gang rape and murder of a [Dalit teenager in Hathras](#) has been the one that has travelled most widely around news networks recently. In September, the 19-year-old was allegedly assaulted by four upper caste men, found by her mother and then later died in hospital, after having given a statement against her attackers. The incident in itself is horrific, compounded by the amount of support that has been given to the accused, rather than the victim. Furthermore, there are already [significant barriers for victims to access justice](#), as stated in a report written by the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative and the Association for Advocacy and Legal Injustices, where it was revealed just how difficult it was to register a First Information Report (FIR) on sexual assault, and that police will often humiliate, discourage and harass women who have the bravery to come forward.

India's [National Education Policy 2020](#) has been produced, and we are heartened to see that a focus on equity and inclusion is one of the notable aims. A section has been devoted to Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), which includes, girls, transgender and children with special needs, children from rural areas, Dalits and victims of trafficking. This reform comes after 34 years, and six years of consultation. We are also pleased to report that in Andhra Pradesh, the government has decided that it will [no longer be acceptable to mark caste or religion](#) in school attendance registers. Meanwhile the University Grants Commission (UGC) has asked all vice-chancellors [to be more sensitive when dealing with incidents of caste-based discrimination](#), and continues to collect information on incidents from universities and colleges across India.

From October 2020 [Amnesty International were no longer able to work inside India](#), following years of threats, intimidation and harassment, with Amnesty India's bank accounts frozen without notice. This action was taken following reports on the Delhi riots where police complicity in violence against Muslims were flagged up, and the detentions and internet restrictions occurring in Kashmir. Amnesty have been accused of trying to tarnish India's reputation, but India seems to be quite capable of doing that all by themselves on occasion: under the present Modi government, journalists have been silenced, minorities persecuted by the BJP, and students, academics, lawyers and activists arrested and detained under 'anti-terrorism' laws. [The failure of](#)

[the international community to call out India on its human rights abuses](#) is also disturbing: other than a few UN reports or work from NGOs, there is little being done to stop the current Hindutva nationalism that demonises minorities, fails to emancipate the Dalit community and often ignores crimes committed against women. With the closure of Amnesty India, along with a number of other NGOs in the country, it is more important than ever that governments make their voices heard and condemn the current situation.

Recently, a Dalit family in Tamil Nadu found themselves trapped inside their land when upper-caste villagers fenced them in. With six acres of land, they produce a healthy crop, but while they can walk on a neighbour's land to reach the village, there is no access for lorries and tractors, which are vital for harvesting. The barbed metal fence was completed while the family were sleeping, and they have been threatened with violence if they try to leave.

On a more positive note, casteism is being handled head on by a Keralan community by setting up a barbershop that caters to all castes. The Vattavada panchayat (village council) intervened when it was reported to them that members of the Chakkiliyan community were forbidden from entering the two existing barbershops, which have now been closed. Previously the 700 members of this scheduled caste either had to cut each other's hair or go to another village 40km away.

Much is made of caste-based discrimination being limited to Hindus. However, in Chennai, there has been a backlash from Dalit Catholics over the discrimination that low-caste clergy are subjected to when bishops and cardinals are appointed. There is risk of a schism between the two groups: while 60% of India's Christians are Dalit, they make up only 11 of the 188 bishops, 31 archbishops and none of the four cardinals. In fact, only 4% of the 30,300 priests in India are Dalit. The Vatican hasn't yet responded to the accusation that not enough is being done within the Holy See to curb discrimination. Consequently, the plan led by the National Council of Dalit Christians is to get the pope to permit Dalit Catholics and priests to have their own rite and church, while still under the Holy See.

Odisha has announced the launch of the 'Garima' scheme for sanitation workers across the state, which is aimed to ensure the safety and dignity of the workforce in urban areas. Usually at the bottom of the economical chain and subjected to caste discrimination, the scheme will include life insurance cover, health check-ups, 90% grants for housing and family pensions. Not only has Rs 50 crore been made available, but working hours will be limited to 6 hours a day, with free health checks.

NEPAL

Often it is believed that caste-based discrimination is confined to villages and rural areas, but in Nepal, a number of Dalits have found that the problem persists in cities as well. One migrant to Kathmandu, hoping that the higher level of economic wealth and education would change things, found herself evicted once her landlady had found out she was a Dalit, and had to lie about her caste in order to find somewhere to rent, only to have her water and electricity cut off when her identity was revealed. Another migrant and her family who moved to the city were treated differently by the neighbours and denied access to the communal water tap and the local tea shop. The family were even physically attacked at one point. Another Dalit noted that discrimination took a different form in the city: 'In Kathmandu people did not bring up caste directly, but would insinuate things which was difficult to counter.' Despite legislation, it seems that education and wealth is not enough to ensure a fair-playing field for all castes.

As is well known, [Dalit communities have suffered disproportionately](#) from Covid-19, in a number of ways. A recent study found that nearly 82% of Dalits are in financial distress due to the pandemic, 45% had lost their jobs, and even after lockdown, because of travel restrictions, they couldn't work as day labourers. Furthermore, high levels of illiteracy meant that 13% of Dalits didn't have information about the infection risks. Casteism even played a role in how relief was distributed, with 18% experiencing caste-based discrimination on a national level.

A Dalit peoples' representative has been [threatened for calling out caste-based discrimination](#). Her daughter was refused permission to grind maize in a local mill owned by someone from a 'dominant' caste on the grounds of untouchability. The accused vowed not to let it happen again, so the victim withdrew her complaint. However, her mother, who is a people's representative, was cornered by locals who demanded her resignation, particularly when she threatened to take legal action against them. It seems that despite Nepal's declaration that they have been an untouchability-free nation in 2006, there are still cases being brought.

NIGERIA

Despite changes to the law to outlaw the caste system, there are concerns that the practice of [discrimination against the Osu in Igbo Land](#) persist. Recently it was reported that a couple allegedly took their own lives because their parents refused to give their consent to their marriage, due to caste practice. While much has changed, particularly with the backing of the Church, there remains issues over intermarriage. There have been some notable successes, such as that in the Ozalla community in Nkanu West, where the traditional leaders, town union leaders and other stakeholders performed traditional rites to create equal social status throughout the community. And in the [Nsukka area](#), where the practice is still rife, the Catholic Bishop of the diocese has threatened to excommunicate those who continue to act in such a way.

USA

Much was made of the lawsuit brought against Cisco by the State of California for allowing caste-based discrimination to exist within their company. Since then, [over 250 Dalits from a number of companies in Silicon Valley](#) have reported discrimination, bullying, ostracization and sexual harassment by 'dominant' caste Indians. These include 33 complaints from Facebook, 20 at Microsoft, another 24 at Cisco and 14 at Amazon, not including those from Twitter, Dell, Netflix, Apple, Uber and Lyft, and several smaller companies (both inside and outside the technology sector). With over 800,000 Indian migrants working in US tech and Fortune 500 companies, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the US is going to have to handle this, especially in light of the increasing number of Indians that migrate to the US.

NGOs in the US have taken to the streets in a number of cities, including New York and Pennsylvania, decrying the seemingly entrenched casteism that appears rife in Indian institutions. The gang rape and murder in Hathras has thrown up a disparity between how caste-based discrimination is being [viewed in India and the US](#). In India, protests have taken place by both those who seek justice for the victim, and those who claim that the accused have been unfairly treated, denying that the victim's last words put blame on members of the so-called 'higher' castes. Furthermore, while supporters of the accused have been threatening the victim's family, the police have done little to prevent their mass protests (despite Section 144 preventing gatherings of more than four people), whilst arresting over 400 of those supporting the victim's family.

THE YEMEN

Lower castes have suffered disproportionately during the Covid-19 pandemic, but the same also applies to those besieged by war. [The Al-Muhamasheen](#) ('the marginalised ones') once referred to as 'Akhdam' or 'servants' by the rest of Yemeni society, and have suffered discrimination, exploitation and poverty for centuries. While The Yemen officially abolished the caste system, it still persists. Members of the Muhamasheen have mostly been kept to the slums on the outskirts of cities, and forced to take on menial low-paid work, such as rubbish collection and cleaning, having been blocked from other economic opportunities. Currently, Rawu Saeia and her family have been forced to live in a cave after fleeing the violence of the war, and food and water are scarce. Efforts to ease the suffering of victims of the war rarely reach this community, and they continue to be marginalised.