

DSN-UK Spring Newsletter 2022

*The regal realm with the sorrowless name:
they call it Begumpura, a place with no pain,
No taxes or cares, none owns property there,
no wrongdoing, worry, terror, or torture.
Oh, my brother, I've come to take it as my own,
my distant home where everything is right.
That imperial kingdom is rich and secure,
where none are third or second – all are one;
They do this or that, they walk where they wish,
they stroll through fabled palaces unchallenged.
Oh, says Ravidas, a tanner now set free,
those who walk beside me are my friends.*

Begumpura (Land without Sorrow) - Sant Ravidas

Introduction by Gazala

Written 500 years ago, the poem reflects a utopian dream of a stateless, classless and casteless society. An aspiration of millions from the underprivileged Dalit communities, the struggle for which persists even in the modern day and time.

The same is true of the community from South Asian countries that migrated to the United Kingdom, who came with the dream of prosperity and security. However, they still carry the spectre of their identity with them. This has manifested in discrimination at educational institutions, workplaces and in day-to-day social interactions. The Dalit Community, estimated to be around 250,000-strong in the UK, still experience discriminatory behaviours and practices in their daily lives. For them, *Begumpura* is yet to be realized.

Dalit Solidarity Network UK (DSN-UK) has been engaged in campaigns for recognizing caste-based discrimination still haunting millions of those from the Dalit communities. Since 2005, DSN-UK has argued that caste is different from racial discrimination, and consequently needs specific recognition to ensure that there is adequate protection for victims.

The highlight of the decade of 2010 for DSN-UK was a campaign for the inclusion of caste as a protected characteristic in the Equality Act 2010. Though not yet recognized, the struggle continues. At the same time, DSN-UK also worked to improve lives of those suffering caste and working descent-based discrimination in South Asia in conjunction with its partners and network.

Going forward, in the decade of 2020 DSN-UK will take forward its legacy work on the legislation, while at the same time bettering the lives of those facing caste-based discrimination wherever it is found. The focus will include educational institutes where students face discrimination based on caste and working descent; and work on human rights and caste-based discrimination in business and international development.

One campaign that DSN-UK has initiated where the support of our network and partners is sought is

[Reporting Everyday Casteism](#). We have already had a number of responses through our online reporting mechanism, covering workplaces, educational institutes and social interactions, but wish to ensure that all voices are being heard. This is a request to you to share this campaign so that a greater body of knowledge and experience is collected on Everyday Casteism. The objective of the campaign is to feed the future campaigns on legislation and others in the UK. If there is one thing that you can do today to make a difference, it is to share these details as widely as possible.

Gazala Shaikh, Director

UK News

DSN-UK were incredibly proud to receive a Certificate of Recognition of their Everyday Casteism Project by the London Faith and Belief Forum. The awards ceremony was held virtually on the 29th November, and gives us the opportunity to join the F&BF's Movement Builders network, which will allow us to continue to raise awareness and underline that casteism is neither perpetrated nor experienced by any one particular religion or belief system.

The APPG for Dalits has been hard at work once more, ensuring that caste-based discrimination is kept on the government's agenda. In December, Lord Harries of Pentregarth asked what progress the UK government had made towards their commitments to provide health services; water and sanitation; and access to justice for marginalised communities in Nepal, including Dalits. Lord Alton of Liverpool and Lord Collins of Highbury also asked questions, including on the current state of the National Dalit Commission, access to Covid-19 vaccinations for marginalised communities and general representation of the Dalit community in discussions. A full transcript can be found [here](#).

Also in the UK, the effects of India's Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) has also caused concern, with the matter being discussed in the House of Lords. The Indian government's refusal to renew a number of licences to NGOs operating in the country has caused significant problems, particularly foreign aid aimed at helping marginalised communities. Those affected include Oxfam India and Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, and there is concern that certain NGOs have been targeted because of their areas of support. The government has said that they are [looking into the issue](#).

International News

At the 48th Regular Session of the Human Rights Council (HRC48) in September and October, [IDSN issued some key recommendations](#) to the UN Member States. Participating states are encouraged to consider discrimination based on work and descent (caste-based discrimination), and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights continues to address the issue. However, more needs to be done to ensure that casteism is recognised by the Council and mainstreamed into UN resolutions; and that it is regarded as being equal to other forms of discrimination.

IDSN took part in the UN Forum on Business and Human Rights at the end of November, on the urgent need to address caste discrimination and violence in global supply chains. They contributed to sessions on gender mainstreaming, tech regulation, mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence, and charting the UN's next decade of work on business and human rights. The recommendations and briefings from IDSN focused on [caste- and gender-based violence in the garment industry](#) and [caste-hate speech](#).

At the same time the [Sanitation Workers Forum 2021](#) was held virtually, to find ways to protect the safety and dignity of those employed in this work. Bezwada Wilson of Safai Karmachari Andolan discussed the link between caste and manual scavenging, reminding supporters to talk about the personal empowerment of workers, not just the depressing hazards that it presents. Involving over 69 speakers from around the world, the event was designed to share knowledge and good practice, encouraging sanitation workers to represent themselves; and discuss future areas of research, policy and practice.

Facilitated by IDSN, three Dalit human rights defenders were panellists at the [EU-NGO Human Rights Forum](#) in December, discussing caste-related barriers to healthcare in Pakistan, post-covid economic and social recovery for Dalit workers in South Asia, and building corporate accountability. Under the title of 'Rebuilding Better: A Human Rights Based Recovery from the Pandemic', the delegates covered caste and religious based discrimination in Pakistan, particularly in regard to sanitation workers; how to support Dalit workers, particularly women, in global supply chains; and the need for a multi-stakeholder approach in ensuring corporate accountability and addressing caste-related human rights abuses.

Bangladesh

The [Minority Rights Group](#) and [Human Rights Watch](#) condemned the deadly attacks on Dalits and other Hindus in Bangladesh occurring during the Durga Puja (this Hindu festival marks the victory of the goddess Durga in her battle against the shape-shifting asura, Mahishasura), with IDSN strongly supporting their statements. Tragically, four people died when police opened fire to contain a mob, with a further 100 reported injured and another 3 dead amid clashes. This is against the backdrop of increasing levels of violence against minorities.

IDSN member the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) brought together Dalit leaders and activists from across Bangladesh to the [Dalit Women Conclave](#) in September. The many disadvantages that faced Dalit women were highlighted, and that the government needs to be pressured to recognise these issues and acknowledge their many informal roles, including in the sanitation sector. Following on from this in October, a road rally and discussion meetings were held to demand the enactment of the 'Abolition of Discrimination Act', which aims to establish the rights of Dalits in Bangladesh, and is long overdue.

Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) have produced a report on the [difficulties that marginalised groups face in Bangladesh](#), of which there are estimated to be at least 30 million. Not only do they face a negative attitude, but they are also discouraged from using accountability mechanisms to change things. Due to the lack of an anti-discrimination law, they are unable to file complaints or lawsuits, often due to linguistic, financial, and technical difficulties, along with corruption that adds an extra burden to the low-income, less educated marginalised population in Bangladesh.

The Gambia

This month the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) continued work in The Gambia on the [draft report on caste and descent-based discrimination](#), which aimed to understand how widespread it was, the factors driving it, where it was found and what challenges it presented to victims. Having found that there is a separation of graveyards, praying grounds and a refusal to inter-marry, and continued disputes based on caste, the President of the Supreme Islamic Council stressed that this discrimination contradicts Islamic teachings. It is hoped that the document will provide interventions and strategies to help end the practice of caste-based discrimination.

India

In September the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index on India was released, which noted that although progress has been made, Dalits and Adivasis are still disproportionately poor, as are women and girls. Published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, five out of six poor people are from Scheduled Tribes (STs), Scheduled Castes (SCs) or Other Backward Castes (OBCs). However, this is a big improvement from a decade earlier, where 80% of STs lived in multidimensional poverty (compared to 50% now), and two-thirds of SCs (compared to one-third now). Unlike other measures of poverty, the Index includes 3 main dimensions: health, education and standard of living; and measures poverty through 10 indicators, including child mortality, nutrition, years of schooling, child enrolment, electricity, drinking water, sanitation, flooring, cooking fuel and assets. For the briefing, read [here](#).

One of the few cases of caste-based discrimination that hit headlines all over the country was that of the Dalit cook in Uttarakhand whose food was refused and boycotted by 'dominant' caste students. In response to her firing and the introduction of a new 'dominant' caste cook, the [Dalit students responded by boycotting the meals](#), much in the way that their fellow students had done. However, we are delighted to hear that [the original cook has now been re-instated](#), and congratulate those Dalit students who forced the issue.

The issue of [burial grounds for Scheduled Castes](#) continues to be a problem. At the end of last year, the interment of a member of the Arunthathiyar community was halted when they tried to access the cemetery used by Paraiyars and OBCs in Cuddalore. In response the Madras High Court ordered the government to [convert all caste-based burial grounds in Tamil Nadu into a common burial space](#). Unfortunately, such cases come to court frequently.

Nepal

The UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty, Olivier De Schutter visited Nepal in November, leading to a statement on the persistent interconnections between caste and poverty; the issues of caste violence; and the need to have greater political representation of Dalit women. During his visit, he took time to engage with many of IDSN's members and affiliates, and his press release brought up the continuing unresolved issues of land redistribution to previously bonded labourers, many of whom are Dalits. You can find his comments relating to caste [here](#).

With Nepal near the end of its [12th national census](#), there have been complaints about there only being the option of selecting Hindu if one has selected Dalit. It has been argued that this doesn't take into account the number of Dalits who have converted to Christianity with the hope of escaping caste-based discrimination. Much like the Hindu Dalits that converted to Buddhism in India, Nepal risks a reduction in the number of Hindu adherents without adopting progressive policies and prosecuting those who engage in casteism

Nigeria

The Anglican and Roman Catholic churches came together to oversee [the abolition of slavery and the caste system in Eha-Alumona](#) in Nsukka on New Year's Eve. The ceremony was also attended by

traditional rules, politicians and Eha Alumona dignitaries to officially disavow these types of discrimination that have historically occurred in the community. Prior to the arrival of Christianity, those who were ousted from the community or became slaves through conquest were separated from the rest and seen as inferior. It has only been over the last few years that caste-based discrimination has been illegal.

Pakistan

Having already been released in Nepal, India and Bangladesh, the International Commission on Dalit Rights (ICDR) launched the Pakistan section of the Dalit Justice Defenders Reports at the end of 2021. It particularly highlighted the discrimination faced by Dalit defenders and lawyers, and that when seeking legal help, often cases will not be taken on for fear of not being paid due to poverty. There were a number of key recommendations, including a job quota for Scheduled Castes, a Dalits rights commission, and penalising discriminatory practices. Meena Varma, Director at IDSN also spoke at the event, explaining the intersectional discrimination that Dalit women face, and how the limited access to the justice system leads to other challenges, such as forced conversions, forced marriages and sexual violence. To read the report in full, see [here](#).

An article from Scroll.in has highlighted the fact that [discrimination against Pakistani Christians has little to do with faith](#) but rather with caste. Muslims do not consider themselves as practising casteism, but it is an ideology spread throughout the subcontinent. Dalits would convert to Christianity in the hope of improving their social status but found themselves still trapped within the caste system. Furthermore Muslim Dalits are often forced into servitude, where they are still considered 'untouchable'.

An [increase in the number of Christian sanitary cleaners](#) is a staunch reminder that caste-based discrimination exists in Pakistan. The majority are uneducated and are easily pressured into taking on these jobs. According to the 1998 census, Christians held 80 per cent of sanitary posts, even though they made up only 1.6% of the population. This situation has not been helped by the fact that the government ordered that this work was reserved for non-Muslims.

Sri Lanka

The UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery raised his concern over [caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka](#), which is often overlooked. He mentioned that in the Northern Province oppressed castes aren't able to find suitable land and water; workplace harassment occurs, even by public officials; promotion is difficult; and there are still instances of violence and abuse. Attempts to address this issue are silenced and leaves oppressed castes with limited access to decent work 'thereby increasing the risk of contemporary forms of slavery.'

USA

[California State University has added caste to its list of protected characteristics](#) in its anti-discrimination policy, as of 1st January 2022. After two years of student organisation, and despite protests from the Hindu American Forum, Dalit students and employees now have a means of justice. It is encouraging that some universities are considering the implications of casteism within their ranks, and hopefully more will follow suit.

Harvard has become [the first Ivy League university to recognise caste-based discrimination](#) within its Graduate Student Union. Although 'caste' has not been recognised throughout the mechanisms of

the university, this is a good place to begin and is the result of several strikes and eight months of bargaining.