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India's lower castes face segregation and ostracism

By Jill McGivering in Delhi

Ahead of a major UN conference on racism, due to open in South Africa on Friday, many Indian non-government groups are demanding that caste-ism - discrimination on the grounds of caste - should be added to the agenda.

Indian officials have rejected their demands, saying the issue is not appropriate.

However, activists argue that despite many official measures, caste is still a constant cause of oppression for more than 250 million people at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

In the small village of Kalvakol, the murder of a young lower caste man by higher caste villagers has highlighted an issue many feel should be discussed at the world forum.

Caste hatred

The man was dragged into the fields surrounding the village, tortured for more than an hour, then burned alive.

His young widow, Namala Kuruvamma, says he was killed because he was a low caste man who refused to feel inferior.

He made enemies, she says, because he was a strong character and always spoke his mind.

“ You go and find out what kind of person he was... What do you expect us to do - hand over the whole village to those people? ”

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Bayanna Gare Pentaiah

More than a dozen high caste villagers have been arrested, accused of the murder - a charge they deny.

One of them, Bayanna Gare Pentaiah, is angrily defiant:

"You go and find out what kind of person he was," he said.
"What do you expect us to do - hand over the whole village to those people?"

Segregation

In many village schools, children from lower castes have to sit separately - sometimes even outside the classroom.

Their families usually have to live slightly outside the main village - and in teashops they are offered a different set of cups from everyone else.

Many Indian activists say casteism is still widespread in Indian society, and should be discussed at the conference in Durban.

Martin MacWan, the convenor of the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights, says a huge number of people face lifelong discrimination because they were born at the bottom of the caste system.

"There are 160 million people only in India - 240 million in South Asia continue to live in subhuman conditions. It is a community of the worst discriminatory lot on the planet today," he says.

"I think it's high time the human rights community of the world pays attention to the cause."

'No point'

Indian officials have said raising the issue at Durban will not do any good. They point to existing legislation which provides quotas for people from low castes in politics and government jobs.

"Whatever is possible within a democratic structure is being attempted by the government," says Bir Singh Parsheera from the Indian Government's National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

He adds: "There's very little any other organisation can do,



Many Indian schoolrooms are out of bounds to lower castes



Lower castes must also use separate teashop cups

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except perhaps contribute financially to accelerate their social and economic development."

"Otherwise the government of India, as also the state government, is fully conscious of their responsibility to ensure that they're brought into the mainstream as quickly as possible."

Success stories

There are some success stories. In India's cities and hi-tech industries, caste is far less of an issue.

But despite running his own IT company - an unusual achievement for a lower caste man - Srinivas Rao says his caste is still a handicap, in subtle ways:

"I'm not trying to complain - see, whatever I'm having now, I've done it totally on my technical skills," he says.

"But when my competitors, everybody, has someone up there in the government to help them out, I don't have anybody. I don't know whether you would call this discrimination," he adds.

In the city, Mr Rao and others like him, can worship freely at the Hindu temple - in many villages, they would be stopped from entering.

Ideas are slowly changing - but the drive for more rights for low castes is also bringing fresh conflicts, with many from upper castes - like those in the village of Kalvakol - determined to use any means to protect the status quo.

“
The government of India is fully conscious of their responsibility to ensure that [lower castes] are brought into the mainstream as quickly as possible
”
Bir Singh Parsheera,
Indian Government



Srinivas Rao says his caste is still a handicap

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