

Caste discrimination and harassment in Great Britain

Abstract

Caste discrimination and harassment has not been explicitly covered by British discrimination legislation. However, the Equality Act 2010 includes the provision that, by order of a Minister, caste may be treated as an aspect of race. This research was commissioned to help inform the Government whether to exercise this power. The research sought to identify whether caste discrimination and harassment in relation to aspects covered by discrimination legislation (i.e. work, education and the supply of goods and services) exists in Britain. Evidence suggesting such discrimination and harassment was found.

Key findings

- The term 'caste' is used to identify a number of different concepts, notably, *varna* (a Hindu religious caste system), *jati* (an occupational caste system) and *biraderi* (often referred to as a clan system). The examples of caste discrimination identified related to *jati*.
- Caste awareness in Britain is concentrated amongst people with roots in the Indian sub-continent (who comprise five per cent of the population). It is not religion specific and is subscribed to by (and affects) members of any or no religion.
- The study identified evidence suggesting caste discrimination and harassment of the type covered by the Equality Act 2010 in relation to:
 - work (bullying, recruitment, promotion, task allocation);
 - provision of services; and
 - education (pupil on pupil bullying)¹.
- The study also identified evidence suggesting caste discrimination and harassment which may fall outside the Equality Act 2010 in relation to voluntary work, harassment, demeaning behaviour and violence.
- The caste discrimination and harassment identified in this study was by higher castes against the lowest castes.
- There is no clear evidence on whether the extent of caste discrimination and harassment is changing. There are both positive and negative influences at work.
- To reduce caste discrimination and harassment the Government might take educative or legislative approaches. Either would be useful in the public sector. However, non-legislative approaches are less likely to be effective in the private sector and do not assist those where the authorities themselves are discriminating. Relying on the Indian community to take action to reduce caste discrimination and harassment is problematic.
- Equality Act 2010 provisions on religious discrimination cannot cover caste discrimination and harassment as effectively as caste-specific provisions would.

¹ Pupil on pupil bullying is not directly covered by the Equality Act 2010. However, the actions of a school may be covered where it deals with bullying in a particular way because of a protected characteristic (e.g. race, sex).



Background

Caste discrimination and harassment has not been explicitly covered by British discrimination legislation. However, the Equality Act 2010 allows, by order of a Minister, caste to be treated as an aspect of race. This would offer protection against discrimination and harassment in areas such as work, education and goods and services.

This research was commissioned to identify whether caste discrimination and harassment exists in these areas in order to help inform the Government whether to exercise the power.

Key evidence from the study

Caste

The term 'caste' is used to identify a number of different concepts, notably, *varna* (a Hindu religious caste system), *jati* (an occupational caste system) and *biraderi* (often referred to as a clan system). The examples of caste discrimination identified related to the *jati*. There are thousands of *jati*. An individual's *jati* (or caste) is determined by that of their forefathers (such as sweeper, leather-worker).

The British population affected by caste

Caste awareness in Britain is concentrated amongst people with roots in the Indian sub-continent (who comprise five per cent of the population). It is not religion specific and is subscribed to by (and affects) members of any or no religion.

Individuals may reject the notion of caste, but still be regarded by others as having a caste.

Caste discrimination and harassment may occur between any castes. However, that found in the study was against the lowest castes. Estimates of the size of the low caste population in Britain vary between 50,000 and 200,000 or more.

Some religious groups are almost wholly from the lowest castes: Ravidassia, Valmiki, Ramdasis and Ambedkarite Buddhists. Christians with roots in the Indian sub-continent are also often assumed to be low caste.

Beliefs about caste discrimination and harassment in Britain

Views on the existence and nature of caste discrimination and harassment in Britain vary extensively. Some believe it exists and is highly destructive. Some believe it is limited to personal social relations (e.g. marriage). Others believe it does not exist.

Evidence on caste discrimination and harassment relevant to the Equality Act 2010

The study identified cases where the evidence suggested caste discrimination or harassment relevant to the Equality Act 2010 had probably occurred. These related to:

- work (bullying, failure to recruit, promotion, task allocation);
- provision of services (the provision of personal care, access to a day centre); and
- education (pupil on pupil bullying)².

Other examples relating to education (bullying by teachers and refusal of a place at a school) were also identified. However, the evidence presented was inadequate for the researchers to make a judgement as to the likelihood that the actions were because of caste.

² Pupil on pupil bullying is not directly covered by the Equality Act 2010. However, the actions of a school may be covered where it deals with bullying in a particular way because of a protected characteristic (e.g. race, sex).



Evidence on other caste discrimination and harassment

The study identified cases where the evidence suggested caste discrimination or harassment outside the remit of the Equality Act 2010 had occurred. These related to:

- voluntary work (dismissal);
- worship and religion; and
- public behaviour (harassment in public places).

Caste discrimination and harassment was also reported in respect of political activity.

At the extreme, caste prejudice and harassment resulted in violence.

Caste discrimination: who is affected

In all cases of caste discrimination and harassment identified in the study the victim was of low caste and the perpetrator(s) of higher caste.

Current response to alleged caste discrimination and harassment

Four responses to alleged discrimination and harassment were identified in the case studies:

- taking the case to the authorities (the school, the employer, the service provider, the police);
- speaking to the perpetrators (or their parents);
- doing nothing; and
- taking the law into one's own hands.

People's experience of taking cases to the authorities varied. For some, it was satisfactory (i.e. the discrimination or harassment stopped). For others, problems were perceived with this approach due to 'the authorities' being non-Asians and therefore ignorant about caste.

Speaking to the perpetrators (or their parents) did not seem to yield change and might escalate the problem.

Others did nothing. This was for a range of reasons, including: that the authorities were of the same caste as the perpetrators (or were the perpetrators); reluctance to have to explain caste to non-Asians; a belief that they would not understand and so one would be seen as a troublemaker; embarrassment and shame at having to reveal one's own caste; a lack of belief that there would be any effective action taken; and a belief that going to the authorities would exacerbate the problem and lead to retribution. This meant that some took the law into their own hands, which tended to lead to violence.

Caste discrimination: the effects

The personal consequences of alleged caste discrimination and harassment include:

- reduced career prospects, lower earnings;
- detrimental effects on education;
- social isolation;
- reduced access to social provision;
- depression, loss of self-esteem, loss of confidence; and
- anger.

Consequences also include public violence.

The effect on community cohesion is unclear, depending on the definition of 'community'. Caste (as opposed to caste discrimination and harassment) is seen by some as providing identity and support and so reinforcing community. By others, it is seen as dividing people and communities.

Caste discrimination: is it dying out?

Anti- and pro-caste legislation organisations express opposing views about the trend in caste awareness. The former consider caste to be dying out in this country (if not already dead); the latter believe it remains and will remain strong. There is no hard evidence either way. Whilst one belief is that caste awareness is strongest amongst the older



generations and will die with these, other factors can be identified which may counteract this (e.g. new migration from the Indian sub-continent and a reported growth in caste-pride amongst the young).

Conclusions and implications

Caste discrimination and harassment

The study found evidence of caste discrimination and harassment in Britain in areas relevant to the Equality Act 2010, namely in work and the provision of services. It also found evidence of caste discrimination and harassment in other areas, namely education (pupil against pupil bullying), voluntary work (dismissal), worship and religion and public behaviour (harassment in public places). The consequences of these could be severe for the victims.

Religion and caste

Because some religions are almost wholly low caste, some cases of caste discrimination and harassment may be covered by religious discrimination provisions of the Equality Act 2010. However, for caste discrimination and harassment, religious provisions are likely to be less effective than caste-specific provisions and are unlikely to provide protection for members of a mixed-caste religion (including many Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Muslims) or for atheists.

Implications for Government policy

The Government might tackle caste discrimination and harassment through:

- extending anti-discrimination legislation to cover caste (i.e. using the power in the Equality Act 2010 to make caste an aspect of race);
- through educative routes.

It might also extend the criminal law to address caste-motivated harassment and violence.

Anti-discrimination legislation would provide access to redress for victims. It would also prompt employers, educators and providers of goods and services to develop non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies. This would lead to much greater understanding of the issues and reduce the acceptability of such discrimination and harassment.

The educational approach is relevant where people are unaware of caste. This approach does not assist those where either the authorities themselves are discriminating or feel helpless to achieve change.

Education without legislation could be effective in the public sector, but is unlikely to be so in the private sector.



About the study

The study was carried out in 2010. It aimed to identify whether caste discrimination and harassment exists in relation to aspects covered by the Equality Act 2010. It entailed a literature review, discussions with organisations and experts with an interest in caste issues and interviews with 32 people who believed they had been subject to caste discrimination and harassment in work, education or the provision of goods and services.

Further information

The study by Hilary Metcalf and Heather Rolfe at the National Institute of Economic and Social Research is published by the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

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