

Casteism amongst Punjabis in Britain

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Despite clear evidence of caste-based discrimination, harassment and victimisation, Punjabis in Britain stand divided on identifying with the victims of casteism. In the context of legislative, religious and academic contestations on caste discrimination in Britain, this article argues for acknowledging casteism where it exists.

In April 2013, the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act (ERRA) was enacted in Britain. Section 97 of the ERRA requires government to introduce a statutory prohibition of caste discrimination into British equality law by making “caste” an aspect of the protected characteristic of “race” in the Equality Act 2010, thus prohibiting caste discrimination as a subset of race discrimination. In the context of this direction, the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) contracted a team of experts drawn from different research institutions to carry out an independent study on caste in Britain. I led this team from September 2013 to February 2014. Alongside a detailed review of sociolegal research on this issue, we conducted an experts’ seminar and a stakeholders’ event, producing two reports (Dhanda et al 2014a, 2014b). My intense engagement in this short period with experts and stakeholders offered a unique opportunity to gauge the range of positions on caste in the diaspora. It is important to locate the divergence in views in a complex political economy, including within it the restricted exchange of psychic energies enforced by a dual life in the diaspora, closeted by usually subtle, but sometimes obvious, forms of racism and casteism.

In May 2015, the issue of caste was catapulted to centre stage once again in Britain, raising the political stakes of South Asian voters in the general election. Conservative party candidates were actively lobbied by sections of the South Asian voters to axe the inclusion of caste in the Equality Act 2010, which had been made mandatory by the ERRA, subject to the passage of a secondary order following public consultation. The Conservative party won, the consultation on the secondary order was pushed into the “long-grass” and has not happened at the time of writing. Under pressure from various quarters, the government announced on

2 September 2016 that it will open consultation on whether caste needs to be added to legislation at all, instead of the previously promised consultation on the mandatory secondary order. The pressures of the anti-legislation lobby to avoid at all costs the mention of “caste” in the Equality Act 2010 are relentless. On 15 December 2016, the Conservative MP Bob Blackman (MP Harrow East) demanded “a statement to the House on the consultation document before Parliament rises, so that British Hindus have the optimal opportunity to respond” and “the opportunity to ensure that this ill-thought-out, divisive and unnecessary legislation is removed from the statute book.” Lies beget lies.

On the other hand, the developments in British law were preceded by years of campaigning by opposed groups. On the pro-legislation side, efforts were made by exemplary (Punjabi) activists, such as Chanan Chahal, Arun Kumar and Satpal Muman, chairperson of CasteWatch United Kingdom (UK), who warned in 2000 of the likely backlash from so-called upper-castes if caste discrimination were made a target of criticism. In addition to these veterans, the leadership of the pro-legislation side is largely composed of Punjabis, with notable exceptions of Gautam Chakravarti, Eugene Culas and V T Hirekar.

The EHRC stakeholders’ event on 9 November 2013 clearly indicated a regional split. Of the representatives of Hindu groups present at the event and opposed to the legislation, only three (16.6%) were Punjabi. By contrast, of the representatives of pro-legislation organisations at the event, 15 (75%), a significant majority, were Punjabi. The emergence of regional variations in the leadership positions perhaps rests in the Gujarati/Punjabi difference in experience of caste. Eleanor Nesbitt, a founder member of the UK Punjab Research Group notes that “Gujarati *jatis* in Britain are far more numerous, defying easy ranking ... thus although the ‘highest’ caste (Brahmins) are represented in Britain, the scale does not include any low caste group as stigmatised as the Punjabi Valmikis and Ravidasis” (Nesbitt 1997: 214–15). There is a striking difference in the way in which caste operates in the Gujarati community compared to the Punjabi community. “Caste is

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something that you choose to identify with; there are formal caste associations that represent particular *jati* groups” (Dhanda et al 2014b: 7). Commenting on the “Gujarati caste phenomena in Britain,” Vertovec writes:

caste *identities* among Gujaratis have continued to be of considerable importance with regards to status, marriage, social networks and formal institutions. Caste has also played a major role in differentially reproducing and transforming socio-religious phenomena in Britain. (2000: 92)

Indeed, there are many caste-based organisations in the UK, such as Ramgarhia Gurdwara Society of Hitchin, and Shree Kshatriya Association of UK. Such organisations are acknowledged as cementing communal identity. It is arguable whether Ramgarhia boards managing various gurdwaras should be counted as caste-based organisations. They do not seem to be as direct about accommodating caste identity as, for example, one active and unique caste-based Gujarati organisation, Navnat Vanik Association of the UK. In a history of this community, Jayant Doshi writes:

I realised that the caste system, the customs and traditions are so entwined in our lives that it would be difficult to discard them over night. I realised that the caste based social organisation would be required in our lives for many years to come.¹

Apropos the difference between Punjabis and Gujaratis, I suggest that there exists a split consciousness amongst the Sikhs with regard to caste, owing to a gap between the proclaimed anti-casteist religious ideology and its erosion in practice. Sikh organisations are divided as to how the removal of caste discrimination should be effected—by a legislative or an educational route. In contrast with Hindu Gujarati or Punjabi Muslim communities where the solidarity conferring role of caste is notable (Dhanda et al 2014b), caste pride is criticised as antithetical to the core values of Sikhism (Singh and Dhanda 2014). From the legal point of view, the inclusion of caste in the Equality Act 2010 is no threat to caste-based community formations but opposition to the legislation relies on whipping up fear that these identity-preserving organisations will come under attack if the legislation is enacted. There is a further reason for the

attempted erasure of talk of caste. The resurfacing of the post-1984 Sikh agenda to recognise a separate Sikh identity has veered activism towards a focus on human rights of Sikhs as a group. Hence any tendency which opens fissures within Sikhs is viewed with suspicion. Calls to acknowledge caste discrimination are mistakenly feared as divisive.

Veneer of Religion over Caste

It has been argued that caste legislation “could introduce and reify caste boundaries,” “induce caste based-thinking” and “induce tensions between groups which have never been felt before” (Jaspal and Takhar 2016). This is a rather odd set of conclusions from a study using 23 British Sikh respondents alongside the claim that “caste is maintained as an important aspect of identity.” How can the legislation “introduce” what is already present as a valued source of self-esteem?

Further, each interviewee self-identified as “moderately religious” or “very religious” Sikh, but there is no record of any tension between self-identification as Sikh and caste identity. One would expect that at least one “threat” to caste identity is posed by the core teachings of *Sikhi*, as an anti-caste way of life. Contrariwise, a threat to their identity as Sikhs could stem from caste identification. But none of these potential tensions is recorded or analysed. In support of their caste-is-benign view, the authors cite the British Sikh Report (BSR) 2013 to claim that 61.2% of its sample of 662 online respondents “indicated that they have no concern for caste related issues.” A little maths suggests 39.8% of this sample *do* have concern for caste-related issues. What are these concerns? We are not told.

Unsurprisingly, this significant percentage of the British Sikh population, who have some “concern” for caste-related issues, is not reflected anywhere in the reframing of caste identity as “salient” and “inherent,” but purportedly not prejudiced or discriminatory. Caste prejudice, and its potential to ground discrimination, is simply theorised out of existence, without the need for any remedial action—legal or extralegal.

Opposition to the legislation is connected to the barely hidden fear that the

routine ways of practising caste-based identities will come under scrutiny. Part of the problem here is a lack of understanding of the legislative process, including uncritical repetition of the false claim that the proposed UK legislation implies a requirement, for people to record their caste. There is no such implied requirement, as clearly noted in our EHRC report (Dhanda et al 2014a) and reiterated elsewhere (Waughray and Dhanda 2016). The misleading suggestion that “a statutory prohibition may entrench the notion of caste as form of a social identification” (Pyper 2016) is a ruse to block the legislation on caste discrimination.

Dubiously Manufactured Unity

Various umbrella organisations have sprung up as stakeholders in the last few years since UK legislation on caste began to take shape, such as the Anti Caste Legislation Committee (ACLIC), including mainly Hindu organisations and the eponymous Alliance of Hindu Organisations. Several organisations from the ACLIC participated in the EHRC stakeholders workshop. Amongst the Sikhs, there is the Sikh Council, which insisted that our invitations to the EHRC stakeholders workshop be restricted to them as the sole representative of Sikhs, presenting a “united” view. Being ecumenical, we invited other Sikh representatives too: from the *Kesri Lehar*, the Panjabi Centre and the Sikh Feminist Research Institute, and thus enriched the views represented (Dhanda et al 2014b).

Presently, there are two surveys claiming to represent the British Sikhs’ views. There is the BSR, published annually since 2013, and the Sikh Survey 2016, produced by the Sikh Network, supported by the Sikh Federation UK and following through the agenda set in the Sikh Manifesto in the early 2015. The 10 key areas of this agenda do not include any reference to caste (Tsn_admin 2016). Unsurprisingly, caste discrimination has simply disappeared from the findings of the Sikh Survey. In contrast, the BSR 2016 included a question on caste (“As a Sikh living in the UK, the relevance of caste to me is”), and found that for 11%, caste is “important now and has always been,” for 3% it is “important now and previously did not matter,” and 6% are unsure of the

importance of caste. The headline figure reported in the summary of the BSR 2016 is that 80% consider caste to be unimportant (Singh 2016). Commenting upon this figure, Satpal Muman astutely asked:

Well, what about the remainder 20%? According to the last census there are nearly 4,50,000 Sikhs in the UK and 20% amounts to 90,000 people who believe caste to be important. Further there are over 8,00,000 Hindus. By extrapolating 20%, this will amount to 1,60,000 Hindus. Adding these numbers gives a total of 2,50,000 for whom Caste is important.²

Research amongst Diaspora Punjabis

Research on caste has occurred in Britain in two ways: by British academics conducting textual studies, and by academic and non-academic community groups producing empirical studies from various disciplinary points of view. Caste in general has been examined by Indologists, through a study of ancient texts, and by historians of the precolonial and colonial periods. Specifically, in relation to Punjabis, caste is studied by religious educationists (Nesbitt 1990, 1997) and by social anthropologists (Bhachu 1985; Ballard 1994). Caste has also received attention within “faith guides” (Warrier 2006) and within particular communities (Juergensmeyer 1982; Hardtmann 2009). In addition, caste and casteism have been studied in the context of globalisation and migration (Dhanda 2013; Qureshi 2013); the Sikh diaspora (Jacobson and Myrvold 2011); conversion (Taylor 2014); the experience of prejudice and generational differences (Dhanda 2014); workplace struggles (Wilson 2006); Sikh communities (Kalsi 1992; Sato 2012; Singh and Tatla 2006); identity (Dhanda 2009; Jaspal and Takhar 2016); bullying and name-calling (Bauman 1996; Ghuman 2011); as racism (Dhanda 2015); and with regards to the implications of including caste in the Equality Act 2010 (Dhanda et al 2014a, 2014b; Waughray 2014; Waughray and Dhanda 2016). Finally, beyond the oft-cited National Institute of Economic and Social Research report (Metcalf and Rolfe 2010), caste is covered in several community reports funded respectively by Dalit Solidarity Network, Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance, Hindu Forum

of Britain, and Hindu Council UK (Dhanda et al 2014a).

Caste-related research on Punjabis has focused on the Sikh diaspora with little specifically on Punjabi Hindus. With its focus on middle-class Punjabi Hindus, Raj (2003) has been criticised for ignoring comparison with working-class Punjabi Hindus. Intersectional work is needed to fully understand the relation of class and caste in the diaspora. This relation is not straightforward as the true story below will illustrate.

A plea for the ‘abolition of an unethical and stubborn code of conduct’: On 20 June 2011, during my Leverhulme Research Fellowship project titled “Caste Aside: Dalit Punjabi Identity and Experience,” I received an email:

Dear Meena, Let me introduce myself.

It went on:

As a British Punjabi man in despair I stumbled across much of your work online about caste discrimination... I applaud you for your efforts in bringing an ancient yet still prevalent framework of the caste system under the microscope and opening it up to intellectual debate.

I would like to share my appalling experience with you, and hope that it will be a useful example of lessons learnt, as we try to move towards the abolition of an unethical and stubborn code of conduct.

This Wolverhampton professional in his mid-20s was told by his father to give up on his dream of marrying his beloved, who belonged to a different caste, as it would be “against family traditions.” Still the young man tried to convince them, and the families on both sides agreed to meet to discuss matrimony.

[T]he tension was suffocating at every sitting, meeting and phone conversation. Not before long, the two families were in disagreement over arrangements of the wedding.

He found her father to be “an exceptionally rude man with little interpersonal ability.” Perhaps this impression was caused by a difference of class, overlaid with caste superiority. Words were exchanged. All ties “were severed.” The two lovers continued to meet for one more year. Her parents made her see other suitors. She chose one, having “re-signed herself to her fate.”

He writes:

We had a very strong bond, and I simply cannot let her go. I would have stomachached it if out of choice she did not want to be with me, but I cannot accept that we have to separate for the deranged reasoning imposed by the caste system!

And concludes:

I would like to emphasise that it is not only those who belong to the lower tiers of caste segregation (or as you like to refer to them scheduled castes or SC) that suffer from the injustice. Whether you are viewed as an exclusive member of this bogus society, or whether you are considered as an untouchable, we are all victims!

It is far too late for me, but I would like you to share my experience with the greater community and if I do not make it, maybe it will be a strong wake-up call that clinging on to such deep-seated ignorance ruins and even takes lives.

I replied to the email within an hour or so of receiving it, urging the stranger to get in touch with me or a professional counselling service for help and, also invited him to the CasteWatch UK conference on 2 July 2011 where I was due to speak. There was no reply.

On 7 September 2011, another unexpected email arrived:

It has fallen on me to tell you the sad news that my little brother ... took his own life 24 hrs after emailing you. We (my family & I) didn't understand what had made him come to that decision, until I found the email written to you.

He had not read my reply, she informed me, when I met her later to learn more about this stranger, her brother, who had entrusted me to tell his story.

Unpublished Novel, Play, Documentary

Reflecting on his efforts to publish his novel, *Land without Sorrow*, Balwinder Banga, recalls a literary agent's response: “great if you want to talk about your parents' experiences as *Chamars* and their transition to England but that's not marketable...” (Bhanot and Banga 2014: 124). How can one invoke kinship where none exists? The problem is lack of identification with or, in Ambedkar's words, fraternity.

Some years ago, a successful British-Asian play *The Fifth Cup* addressed the issue of caste. “The play suggests an understanding of caste as a form of race on grounds both of ethnicity and colour”

(Waughray and Thiara 2013: 13). The making of the play was documented in 2007 by Billy Dosanjh, a courageous filmmaker who has recently made *Sikhs in Smethwick* (BBC4 broadcast on 1 December 2016) using archival footage to tell the story of the settlement of early working-class migrants in the Midlands. Dosanjh boldly shows an inter-caste marriage, with the Anand Karaj ceremony taking place in Guru Ravidass Bhavan. His clear voiceover states: “They walk around the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy Bible, four times, to be pronounced man and wife in the eyes of the faith.” This depiction was not an easy directorial decision. In a Skype interview with me, Dosanjh disclosed that the Christian groom and Sikh bride—an inter-caste, inter-religious couple—were turned down by several gurdwaras, on unclear grounds of religion/ caste, before the Handsworth Bhavan stepped up to hold the ceremony. He also reported that following the broadcast of his film, when he went one day to a Smethwick gurdwara for *seva*, he was reprimanded for what he had shown.

When the prevailing rhetoric is either that caste is dying or that it is harmlessly confined to the private sphere and therefore best left alone, it is becoming increasingly difficult to acknowledge the ills of persisting caste self-identification.

Acknowledging Casteism

Perpetrators and victims of casteism are caught in an unacknowledged history of suffering caused by abominable practices—some past, some continuing. Within the restricted economy of exchange of psychic energies, the expected response to a slight is rebuttal, revenge, or retribution, but without the supporting power of legal protection, such responses are blocked or unavailable. Self-sacrifice, or inverted violence, which the young man from Wolverhampton, chose to enact as his rebellion against casteism, is one extreme response. Conversion to a different religion is also chosen by some to escape the traps of casteism. By far the most common position taken by bystanders, sometimes wilfully, sometimes thoughtlessly, is evasion. This “normalises” endemic violence. In the UK, the absence of a sympathetic and informed public and

in some quarters an outright hostility to the mention of legislation on caste (Dhanda 2015), increases the dangers of backsliding on the advances made in the last few years in acknowledging the existence of casteism and its pernicious effects.

At this juncture, Punjabis in Britain have the historic opportunity to set an example for the European, North American and Australian diaspora by collectively lobbying to enact the urgently needed protection against caste discrimination. To accomplish this task, they must rise above factional fights, and by seeking inspiration through their inheritance of an anti-caste legacy from the land of their ancestors, they must forge principled alliances with genuine supporters of human rights to eliminate the menace of casteism.

NOTES

- 1 <http://www.navnat.com/pages.php?page=history> last on visited on 11 October 2015.
- 2 *Samaj Weekly*, “Caste Legislation Debate: House of Commons, Wednesday 23 November 2016,” 28 November 2016.

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