

Santosh Dass MBE – WEF Panel discussion on Human Rights, Equality and Poverty, 1 February 2017, The Bhavan West Kensington, London

[Limit talk to 6 minutes]

I am sure many or most of you will be aware of at least some the following words - Caste, varna, Jati, Dalit or Untouchable in a South Asian context.

The great social reformer, my friend and mentor – Lord Eric Avebury - once wrote something really powerful:

“We have a South Asian population of 4 million in the UK, and we assume that by some miraculous process they left their cultural baggage behind when they migrated here. So caste prejudice and discrimination, though obviously still rife in the subcontinent, is held to vanish somewhere in the skies between Mumbai and Manchester”.

Most of my adult life I have done all I could to protest against inequalities and to highlight injustice. For example, I added my voice against the outrage that was apartheid and the atrocities against women, whether domestic violence, or marital rape in the UK or gang rapes in India. ...And then, the *hidden* apartheid here in the UK that is discrimination based on caste. I didn't want to hear endless talk about discrimination: I wanted to see action to deal with it.

In 2003, I became one of the founding mothers – in a ‘founding father’ sense – of CasteWatchUK. I am now the Vice Chair of the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance. Our vigorous lobbying on legal protection and redress for victims of Caste-based discrimination in the UK helped the passage of legislation which, if and when implemented, will see this unacceptable form of discrimination outlawed.

In 2009 when we - the Anti Caste Discrimination Alliance - invited people to tell us about their experiences of discrimination, two cases out of the many stand out that we published in our report *Hidden Apartheid – Voice of the Community*. The first was the case of a vulnerable elderly Indian woman in the East Midlands. She had faced discrimination and, as a result, neglect at the hands of her carer. The second had been a personal secretary mistreated in the office of a radio station broadcasting to the Indian, particularly Punjabi diaspora. Both cases had one feature in common – the Caste of all the people concerned. If either of these cases had been related to, say, Race or Gender, the victims would have had access to a form of redress, legal or otherwise on the grounds that Race and Gender are ‘Protected Characteristics’ in the Equality Act 2010.

To me, it's clear and simple. If we have laws in the UK to protect members of our society, let's call them vulnerable people, from other types of discrimination – based on, say, age, disability, gender, race and sexuality – why not one Caste-based discrimination?

It's a pity some people and groups feel threatened by equality. Sadly they overlay their prejudices and interests – interest in the Parliamentary sense – to the table. The law will benefit victims of Caste-discrimination – no matter what their Caste. It will not impact on religious worship, who someone marries, or who people socialise with. It is clear that organisations that are pro and anti legislation are on the same page when they say they want to provide redress and prevent Caste-based discrimination in the UK. Legislation can provide the redress and prevention – particularly for those who are not able to engage in dialogue to make things better, as some would suggest. Legislation tends not to divide communities; it can help reinforce good practice and behaviours.

Finally, I'd like to end with the issue of gender imbalance. Sadly there is – and continues to be – a gender imbalance in many of the organisations that I work with at senior levels. But as a woman and in particular an Indian-born woman - I believe we can be vocal on the picket line and can also bring a sense of calm and considered debate to the table. The latter certainly comes naturally to most women. We manage and juggle our homes, money, our children and our grandchildren. We look out for the welfare of our close and extended families.

The many women I am privileged to sit with here today in this room, likewise make valuable contributions to society, contributions everyone benefits from. Conferences like these that allow women to discuss serious issues, and celebrate women's achievements are critical to our progress.

Thank you for listening to one woman's voice.

<http://www.acdauk.org.uk/caste-discrimination.html>