

DALIT SOLIDARITY NETWORK UK

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Press Release

TIME NOW FOR ABOLITION OF CASTE

The celebrations to mark the Act of abolishing the Slave Trade in 1807 were invoked at a meeting in Parliament seeking an end to caste discrimination. Chairing the meeting the Bishop of Chelmsford, Rt Revd John Gladwin, said what an important weekend this was, marking the 200th anniversary of Abolition, and drew parallels with the need to abolish caste discrimination also. Dr Joseph D'souza from the Dalit Freedom Network quoted Wilberforce who had achieved his aim 200 years ago in this same Parliament. Wilberforce said, 'Caste is a system at war with truth and nature'.

The meeting was organised by the Dalit Solidarity Network, in conjunction with Christian Solidarity Worldwide which is hosting the delegation for two weeks, to brief MPs and others on the current situation in the caste struggle. Professor Kancha Ilaiah drew attention to the recent statement by the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, who drew a clear parallel between untouchability and apartheid. He said the situation was getting worse and could lead to civil war. The police continue to be severely repressive towards the 250 million Dalit and Tribal Peoples, with beatings and killings. 'What has changed', said Professor Ilaiah 'is Dalit consciousness and that at a global level'. He spoke also of the need for Dalits to be taught English as that was the language of opportunity.

Indira Athawale spoke about the particular repression experienced by Dalit women. She recounted the incident last September at Kherlanji where - over an argument on land ownership - a mother and daughter were paraded naked, beaten, raped and killed. Two sons were also murdered. Scores of people were involved, thirty were arrested but all have now been freed. Thousand of Dalits came out in protest and such acts of resistance are growing more frequent.

The next speaker Moses Parmar told the story of a village where his organisation was offering support to the Dalit communities. One Brahmin family had controlled a village of 500 Dalits, until finally they rebelled and the Brahmin family were almost murdered. He said that Christianity offers liberation and a future for Dalits.

Dr D'souza, also speaking about the Kherlanji incident, said that in the past it would have been swept under the carpet - now it is being exposed even by the media, largely controlled by the oppressive castes. 'What is being done to Dalits and Tribals is unpardonable and intolerable', he said. He noted that at the beginning of the year the Indian Finance Minister had crowed that with 'India rising' there had been 9% growth last year. What he did not say however that this was only for 20% of the population, little is changing for the many millions of Dalits.

Jeremy Corbyn MP, Chair of the Dalit Solidarity Network (UK), commented afterwards, 'In the light of what has been said today we have a real responsibility continue the struggle, inside the UK Parliament and outside, to raise the consciousness of people in the UK'. Revd David Haslam, Chair of the Network Trustees, said, 'We must get people to realise this is an international struggle for human rights on the same level as the battle against apartheid in the last century, and against slavery the centuries before'.

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