

Caste Discrimination Overseas (Government Policy)

Adjournment Debate in the UK Parliament on 22 November 2005

11 am

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss this subject. It affects a vast number of people throughout the world and there are various ways in which we, as a major industrial trading power, can help to eliminate such a scourge. I wish to declare an interest. It is not in any sense financial, but I am a trustee of Dalit Solidarity Network UK. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Rob Marris) is also an active member of that organisation. I have attended several conferences on the network's behalf in this country and I have also spoken at Dalit Solidarity Network events in Mumbai in India.

The work of the Dalit Solidarity Network is to give voice to a group of people mainly in India and Nepal, but also in other parts of the world, who are grievously discriminated against. It puts pressure on European and North American Governments to do something about that and to use the international legal system, through the United Nations and the United Nations Committee on Human Rights, to give strength to the cause.

Caste discrimination is a hereditary system of discrimination that comes from a perversion of the values of Hinduism in India and which, in the case of Africa, is a similar corruption of mentality, but just as brutal in its discrimination. The number of people throughout the world who suffer **caste** discrimination is astonishing. Those who are seriously discriminated against amount to 300 million people. That number is equivalent to the population of the United States of America or to the population of all of Western Europe. Those people lose out on education, housing, employment and job opportunities. They lose out on life. They suffer death by violence, death by poverty and death by illness because health care is not available to them. As a planet, we condemn 300 million people to the worst living standards and to have shorter lives than would otherwise be the case. Discrimination has brutal consequences. It is hard for us in the west to understand fully how bad the position is.

A Dalit is the modern form of untouchable. When translated, it means broken people. The magazine *New Internationalist* quotes Narayanamma, a toilet cleaner in India. It says:

"In the rainy season,' the woman began, 'it is really bad. Water mixes with the excrement—

"and we carry it (on our heads) it drips from the baskets, on to our clothes, our bodies, our faces. When I return home I find it difficult to eat food sometimes. The smell never gets out of my clothes, my hair. But this is our fate. To feed my children I have no option but to do this work."

The magazine then well describes the differences in modern India. For example, major railway stations have internet connections, western cappuccino bars, fast food restaurants, people in smart

suits and so on. However, 100 m away from those areas, to the backs of the stations and the toilets, are groups of people using the most primitive equipment and who are treated in the most disgusting way. They are the "untouchables"—the Dalit people, who exist throughout India because of a perversion of the values of Hinduism and because it suits the wealthy and powerful to ensure that they continue to exist.

It is not as though the problem has not been recognised. Let me outline the social indicators. The infant mortality rate is 83 per 100,000 for Dalits and 61.8 per 100,000 for non-Dalits. The child mortality rate is 39 per 100,000 for Dalits and 22 per 100,000 for non-Dalits. The figure for undernourishment is 54 per 100,000 for Dalits and 41 per 100,000 for non-Dalits. The level of self-employment in agriculture, rather than employment as day labourers, is 16 per cent. For rural Dalits and 41 per cent. For rural non-Dalits. The level of self-employment in non-agriculture is 10 per cent. For rural Dalits and 14 for rural non-Dalits. The poverty rate exemplifies the pattern, and the level of poverty that exists among the Dalit people throughout Indian cities and villages is appalling by any stretch of the imagination.

As if the poverty and the discrimination are not bad enough, the violence that goes with it is shocking. Many stories could be quoted, and many issues are raised in various local and international media on the subject, but I will just quote a 31 August report, which states:

"In one of the worst ever instances of **caste** violence in Haryana, upper **caste** villages belonging to the Jat community in Gohana village near Sonapat burnt down 60 houses of Dalits today. The officials, however, say about 40 houses were burnt."

That pattern of practice by officials is normal. The Dalits were attacked because it was "apparently suspected" that a Dalit murdered somebody else the previous week. The report continues by detailing the murder, violence and the burning of homes that occurred. Unfortunately, such events are common.

That is not to say that India has not sought to address the problem. Gandhi clearly recognised the discrimination against the untouchable people. During all his marches he sought to seek them out and to work with them. He also sought their protection in the Indian constitution, which, ironically was written by Ambedkar, a Dalit. I shall return to that.

It also must be said that India, as the home of the majority of Dalit people in the world—the majority of people who suffer from **caste** discrimination—is reluctant to have the issue raised internationally. It is to the credit of the Dalit Solidarity Network worldwide and of the Dalit movements in India that the issue was finally brought more to the world's attention in the 2001 summit against racism that was held in Durban.

The Indian Government moved might and main to prevent the subject from being raised in India at all. They said that **caste** discrimination was not the same as racism and that it should not be equated with what had happened in apartheid South Africa or with the degree of discrimination that existed in the southern states of the USA before the Civil Rights Act. They said it was not of that order and that it was more of a cultural issue. It might well have a cultural basis—or a perversion of such a basis—in where it started, but the reality is that it condemns generations of people to a second-class existence when they should be able to have a first-class one.

It is also important to recognise that the problem is now being more widely understood. Such discrimination does not apply just in India, but in Nepal—I will discuss that a bit later—and parts of West Africa, notably in Burkina Faso and Senegal. The same degree of discrimination applies, with the same degree of people not being allowed to go into restaurants or cafes, not being allowed to use the same utensils as other people and not being allowed to undertake any skilled work—only for such people are the foul jobs of cleaning sewers, sweeping streets and that type of thing.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office also recognises that. The excellent Library briefing for the debate includes an extract from the FCO human rights report of 2005, page 213 of which states:

"In many parts of India **caste** discrimination remains a problem, despite being outlawed under the Indian constitution of 1950. Dalits—formerly "untouchables" but now known as "scheduled **castes**"—make up 16 per cent of India's population (this is approximately two and a half times the population of the UK). A proportional number of seats in both union and state assemblies are reserved for scheduled **castes** . . . However, many people continue to view Dalits as below the **caste** system and they are among the most disadvantaged and vulnerable of all Indians. Dalits have poor access to public services such as education, health".

The report mentions that Dalits are reduced to jobs such as "manual scavenging". It also points out that when aid is delivered when a natural disaster, such as the tsunami, takes place, the solution to the problem, obviously, is to assist people at a time of desperate emergency. However, in assisting those people, who loses out but the Dalit people? They are last in line to get water, food, clothes and a place of safety in which to live.

There was a national public hearing on 30 August in Chennai, Tamil Nadu on discrimination against Dalits in tsunami relief and rehabilitation. I shall not quote the entire document, as it is long, but I have selected some of the observations made by the jury of experts who assessed the effects of tsunami relief. It said:

"The jury panel observed that there is discrimination in distributing relief and rehabilitation during tsunami. Particularly the revenue officials and the district administration that were carrying out the relief operations have neglected the requests made by Dalits and not provided the relief materials."

The report goes on to state:

"The relief materials distributed to the Dalits have been plundered by others, and that the

"district administration appointed for monitoring the distribution was inactive and silent in curbing these atrocities . . . During our visit to the tsunami affected areas, we could see that the temporary shelters constructed by both the Government and the NGOs have segregated the Dalits and the fishermen.

We feel that it is the duty of the Government to bring peace and harmony between the communities where already exists the concept of discrimination. Instead the relief operation carried out by the government of Tamil Nadu has widened the division between the Dalits and non-Dalits."

Those millions of people around the world who responded so magnificently to the tsunami disaster did not give their money so that it could be distributed unfairly. They made a humanitarian gesture to ensure that everybody got a fair share of the aid, but the Dalit people certainly did not get a fair share. When my right hon. Friend the Minister replies, I hope that he will offer some assurance on that. I am not blaming the British Government. The concern is whether the aid got through fairly, and, clearly, the evidence is that it absolutely did not.

Despite Indian objections, the Durban conference managed to raise several important issues. I want to deal with what is, obviously, a terrible scourge on the face of the earth. First, I recognise the strong position of Indian law and the Indian constitution on the matter. However, the reality at town and village level, and in society, is that the scheduled **caste** reservation system, which provides for reserved places in state and federal elections and other things in India, works for a small number of people but not for the majority. It does not work for the majority of Dalit people, who continue to be extremely badly treated.

To address the issue, we should consider the Ambedkar principles, which were drafted after a great deal of debate among the community in India, among the exiled community and among the Dalit Solidarity Network worldwide. The Ambedkar principles are based on the work of Ambedkar, a brilliant man who was the author of the Indian constitution. I shall not read all of the document, as it is long, but I shall quote parts of it. Those who have been involved in Irish issues over the years will recognise some similarity with the MacBride principles on employment practices which were eventually introduced in Northern Ireland. They helped to reduce the discrimination that clearly existed there. The principles state:

"The Signatories of these Principles, building on existing national anti-discrimination laws and policies and in the spirit of internationally recognised human and employment rights will . . . Include in any statement of employment policy a reference to the unacceptability of **caste** discrimination and a commitment to seeking to eliminate it . . . Develop . . . a plan of affirmative action, including training on **caste** discrimination for all employees and making specific reference to Dalit women".

Then there is this important principle:

"Ensure the company and its suppliers comply with all national legislation, particularly in relation to bonded labour, manual scavenging, child labour, pay specific attention to the role that **caste** relations might play in legitimising or covering up such forms of labour, and contribute actively to the implementation of existing anti-**caste** laws such as the Civil Rights Act and the Prevention of Atrocities Act."

Supplementary principles were approved later, at a conference in Kathmandu in November and December 2004. I shall quote a few of them, because they are important:

"Ensure that all corporate support to community development programmes and other charitable activities in **caste**-affected countries or areas includes the participation of Dalits and requires that they receive at least an equal share in any benefits . . . Avoid abuse of local resources to the detriment of local communities, e.g. water, energy . . . Aim to ensure

nothing is done which may drive local communities towards ecologically insensitive activities or the desperation of violent protest".

It is easy to stir up violent protest against people. In some parts of the world, that is a cheap way to develop a political career. Those demands are stated because there is a high amount of foreign investment in India and it is important that the situation is addressed. The support of the global companies that are investing in India is needed.

Dalit Solidarity Network UK produced a solid report on **caste** discrimination in the private sector. It lays down a number of demands that should be made of the private sector companies that invest in India. It has started talks with HSBC bank, Lloyds TSB, Standard Chartered and Barclays about their investment strategies. We have also sought to put what pressure we can on the International Labour Organisation to do far more to protect Dalit people and those who suffer **caste** discrimination around the world, and to support the activities of the Dalit Solidarity Network.

This matter has also been brought to the attention of the United States Congress. A submission was made to it in which the following points were made:

"The Indian government 'condones, ignores and in some instances, has even promoted . . . massive catalogues of human rights violations . . . All too often, enforcement of laws protecting human rights has been weak or non-existent' . . . While most Dalits lived in extreme poverty . . . Hindu extremists resented gains made by this oppressed group which benefited from education and medical programmes launched by Christian missionaries."

That leads to further violence against individuals. The report continues:

"Amnesty International's Asia advocacy director T Kumar told the hearing that the Indian government should fully enforce laws against discrimination on the basis of **caste** and descent, and rein in groups, including the police, which he said had discriminated against Dalits."

So the problem has been brought to the attention of western Governments, the European Union and the United States.

There is a point that I hope the Minister will address. The subject has been raised at the United Nations. India is required to report to the UN on what it has done in terms of anti-discrimination activities since 1998 to eliminate systematic discrimination against the scheduled **castes** and the poorest people in India. So far as I am aware, India has yet to report.

The British Government have raised the matter at least once with the Indian Government during bilateral discussions, and I would be interested to learn what further contact the Minister has had with the Indian Government and what requirements are placed on our representatives at the UN Committee on Human Rights and at anti-discrimination conferences of the UN to ensure that we take the problem seriously in terms of implementing the UN charter on human rights and our anti-discrimination undertakings, and of our overseas aid policies and strategy and our investment strategy.

On 24 October, Dalit Solidarity Network UK sent a letter to the Minister for the Middle East, which said:

"As far as we can understand what is happening, the study that the UN required—

"has not yet got underway. This appears to be due to a combination of bureaucracy and lack of resources. We are hearing that the necessary Consultation Workshops, to be held in Africa and Asia, cannot go ahead until the Commission has agreed the necessary resources next March/April. This will be a year into the life of the Study, and such Workshops could not then be arranged presumably for another six months".

We must have far more action far more quickly and far more vigorously to ensure that that dreadful situation is addressed properly.

I should also be grateful if the Minister outlines the Government's thinking on the possibility of amending race relations laws to make **caste** discrimination illegal. There is some evidence—quite hard to collect—that although the degree of **caste** discrimination in India is extreme, it exists in other parts of the world, such as communities in Western Europe, including this country. We must address that problem, uncomfortable and difficult though it may be. Discrimination is wrong, period, whichever group or community and whomever suffer from it. We would do the world and those poor unfortunate people who suffer **caste** discrimination a good service if we took a more vigorous attitude towards discrimination and led on those matters.

In 2004 I had the great privilege of attending the World Social Forum in Mumbai. It was attended by more than 100,000 people. They were mostly from south Asia but, as a world forum, there were also delegations from elsewhere. The opening coincided with the completion of a Dalit rights march throughout India. The people recreated the great marches of Gandhi and demanded justice. Their joy, the sense of recognition that those people received, and their sense of liberation when they got to the forum is something that will always live with me. Some of the same people attended the conference in Durban, and they travel around the world doing their best to bring about justice for those people. It is up to us to do what we can.

One Indian President, Narayanan, made it to President despite being a Dalit—an untouchable. He did so by good luck, brilliance, force of circumstances and the incredible generosity of one or two individuals who helped him throughout his life. After he ceased to be President, he gave an interesting interview in which he was asked what he thought about the Dalit people. After describing the horrors that they faced, he was asked how their situation could be changed. He said:

"Revolution has to come from below—through education and through protest from the oppressed people. We need to gather much more momentum, from world opinion, human-rights groups, etc. We need to give up the bitterness and move on. To be proud of being Dalits. Learn from the Black Panthers, the Black is Beautiful movement. Assert Dalit pride. Only then will we learn to express and assert ourselves. I believe that ultimately we will overcome."

That is a brilliant statement from a man who has been to the top of the mountain and become the President of his country.

I hope that the Government, the House and the country join in that campaign to end the scourge of discrimination based on **caste** which afflicts 300 million people throughout the world.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton, South-West) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing the debate. He has achieved what I was not able to, and I am delighted to be discussing this important issue in front of a number of people who have come along to listen to our debate.

I shall start with a quotation from my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade, who has responsibility for trade promotion and inward investment at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in addition to his ministerial role at the Department of Trade and Industry. In a letter dated 31 August to the Rev. David Haslam, who, as chair of Dalit Solidarity Network UK, of which I am a member, is listening in the Chamber today, my hon. Friend said:

"**Caste**-based discrimination is a contemporary form of slavery."

He is absolutely right.

We fought hard to get rid of slavery 150 years ago. Slavery is a moral outrage, and there is a material-analysis reason for getting rid of it. As well as the moral outrage and the destroyed lives, slavery is an economically inefficient way of organising a society. That is what the American civil war was about: morals and a materialist analysis. We should bear that in mind when we campaign against **caste**-based discrimination.

A year ago, I had the great pleasure of visiting Punjab state in India on a private visit, where 55 per cent of the population is Sikh. There is still **caste** discrimination in Punjab state, as there is across India and Nepal, and in Africa, and so on. I am chair of the all-party group on UK Sikhs. We have to recognise that one of the tenets of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, was to get rid of **caste**-based discrimination. He has not succeeded yet. Sadly, there is still **caste**-based discrimination, even in Sikhism.

We have **caste**-based discrimination here in the UK. Those who know the UK south Asian community quite well, and I count myself as one of those, can sometimes see, by looking at south Asians and those from a south Asian background, from what **caste** they have come—because of systematic discrimination for 2,500 years. Dalit people look different. That is reproduced in this country. Sometimes, sadly, here in the UK, it is possible to get a sense of which is a Dalit and which is a Jat temple, or gurdwara, on visiting them. **Caste** exists in this country, as well as in south Asia and Africa.

The Dr. Ambedkar memorial committee in my constituency has a large community hall. I am familiar with the doctor's work. He was born in the late 19th century as a Dalit, as my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North said, and obtained a PhD through patronage. He was an economist, philosopher, sociologist, member of the London Bar and one of the most distinguished Indians who ever lived; he was a brilliant man. He was chair of the committee that wrote the constitution of India and rose, through patronage, from being a Dalit. However, like President Narayan, he did not forget whence he came. In fact, in 1956, in the final year of his life, after decades of frustration with the reactionary elements of Hinduism—although I stress that by no means all Hindus are reactionary on **caste**—Dr. Ambedkar, with thousands of others, led a mass conversion to Buddhism,

as my hon. Friend may know. His touchstone was "Educate, agitate and organise"—and he did that all his life on the part of the downtrodden of India, before partition and afterwards.

Education is one of the keys, but it has to be backed up by resources, a will to act and more than just fine words. United Kingdom companies operating in the subcontinent have a particular responsibility, because of the history between the United Kingdom and south Asia, for the way that they operate and how they treat Dalit scheduled **castes**. My hon. Friend said that he would not read all the Ambedkar principles, and I understand that. They are contained in a handy book called "**Caste** Discrimination and the Private Sector: Employment Principles for Foreign Investors in South Asia", published this year by the Dalit Solidarity Network UK.

There are 10 calls to action at the conclusion of the Ambedkar principles. I shall paraphrase them. An employer should have a statement of employment policy, including a reference to the unacceptability of **caste** discrimination and a plan of affirmative action; they should avoid any form of bonded or indentured labour; they should use fair recruitment selection and career development processes and take full responsibility for their work force, evolve comprehensive training opportunities, designate a manager at an appropriate level to monitor the issue and have effective monitoring. They should also publish an annual report on progress and ensure that all corporate support to community development programmes includes the participation of Dalits. That is the call to action under the Ambedkar principles. United Kingdom companies that operate in India and Nepal in particular should sign up to those principles and that course of action.

I am fortunate enough to be a member of the Trade and Industry Committee, which has announced that, in this Parliament, we will conduct an inquiry into trade and investment opportunities between India and the United Kingdom. That is not surprising, in terms of globalisation; it is such an important country, and such a long-standing friend of the United Kingdom. One of the things that I wish to look into is what UK companies investing in India are doing in terms of corporate social responsibility and the Ambedkar employment principles.

As we know from what our Government have done to assist the most disadvantaged in our society—they are incomparably more advantaged than the most disadvantaged in India, Nepal and Africa who face **caste** discrimination—the dignity of employment, employment opportunities, and education and skills training to get into those jobs are absolutely central. United Kingdom and European developed-world companies that invest in India have a particular responsibility to try to assist the most downtrodden: the Dalits.

My hon. Friend referred to the difficulties that the United Kingdom faces when the Department for International Development offers aid support, and when UK-based charities try to assist in India after natural disasters there. He also mentioned the issue of unequal distribution of aid, and who loses out. One reason why Dalits lose out is that often they have been denied the educational opportunities that would allow them to hold positions of responsibility and to hand out the money. So, the old **caste**-based discrimination reinforces itself again.

Sometimes, but not always, those of higher **caste** who are handing out the money—surprise, surprise—do not take enough trouble to ensure that the most disadvantaged, the Dalits, get the aid. That was the case with the distribution after the recent tsunami, the Gujarat earthquake, and, before that, the Orissa hurricane. That happens all too frequently. I am delighted that DFID has moved on

that issue, in terms of both what it says and what it demands when handing out development moneys in India after such disasters.

I am also pleased that DFID has a programme, worth £27 million over nine years, to provide funding to civil society organisations in the 100 poorest districts in India. That programme is addressing discrimination against Dalits and supporting marginalised peoples. I salute DFID and the Government for taking that line.

I have some questions for the Minister, as is traditional in these Adjournment debates. First, what have our Government done to address allegations of discrimination based on **caste** in the recruitment of Gurkhas from Nepal? What have they done about the experiences of Dalits who have joined that wonderful band of armed fighting men and women? There have been serious allegations of discrimination, as regards both recruitment and what happens to those recruited, in terms of their career progression—or, according to the allegations, lack of career progression.

I reinforce what my hon. Friend said about the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. As I understand it, the report is eight years overdue. India—understandably, given its size, maturity and importance in the world—wishes to gain a seat on the UN Security Council. However, if in eight years it cannot produce a report on this fundamental issue, which covers a quarter of its population, for the moment at least, it would not be appropriate for India to be on the Security Council. We are not talking about a report on discrimination against a couple of thousand people, important as that might be; we are talking about discrimination against a quarter of the population of what may now be the most, or at least the second most, populous country in the world. Yet it cannot do a report in eight years. What is our Government doing to encourage the Government of India, through the United Nations, to come up with that report?

I salute the fact that the UK, during its presidency of the European Union thus far—there are another five or six weeks to run—has gotten the EU to appoint two special rapporteurs to prepare a detailed study on discrimination based on work and dissent. However, I would like to know what steps the Government, through the EU, have taken with the Government of India to ensure that those rapporteurs have full access. I know from my work with the all-party parliamentary group on UK Sikhs and, during the previous Parliament, the all-party group on Panjabis in Britain, about the lack of access to the Punjab state for the UN special rapporteurs on human rights who, 21 years after the appalling events of 1984, the storming of the Golden Temple, the pogroms in Delhi and so on, are still blocked out and not allowed in to investigate. Will the two EU special rapporteurs be allowed to investigate **caste**-based discrimination in India and to do a proper job there?

To reinforce what my hon. Friend said, I would like to know what the UK Government is doing to encourage UK companies that invest and operate in India to follow the Ambedkar principles.

11.36 am

Mr. Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing a debate on such a crucial topic.

A question that I asked myself—it might be worthy of ventilation here—is why such a grotesque and systematic abuse of human rights on such a huge scale is so little known about and so little

debated. I confess that when preparing for the debate, the scales fell from my eyes as I appreciated the reality of a problem. I was not fully aware of it—I have not visited India and it is not a part of the world that I know well—and my experience may show why.

I studied social anthropology at university and pored over textbooks about the **caste** system in the Asian subcontinent. We were asked to reflect on the history of the **caste** system through a prism of moral relativism, which implicitly, if not explicitly, suggested that the **caste** system and the abuses suffered by the victims of the system were so ingrained in the complex history of society in India and other Asian nations as to be somehow beyond the reach of moral or political judgment or influence from outside. That moral relativism towards something that undeniably exists is complex and has profound religious, historical, social and cultural antecedents. It has prevented the political class in this country and elsewhere from turning the spotlight on a problem as fully and sustainably as it deserves to be. The reticence to deal with the issue as forcibly as it clearly requires is no longer sustainable.

As the hon. Gentleman eloquently illustrated, the scale of the abuse is perhaps without historical precedent. There has been appalling human rights abuse at specific times and in specific places, but for that abuse to take place on such a scale, covering almost 300 million people over such a long period, is almost unique. I am not aware of any other cruelty that has been so durable. The grotesque nature of the abuse cannot be ignored any longer.

I challenge everyone to read the Amnesty International report submitted to the hearing of the US Congress. I dare not read out the section on the scale, nature and cruelty of the abuse suffered by Dalit women in particular. The descriptions of rape and gang rape are about as grotesque as anything one could possibly read.

It is, perhaps, politically important that that abuse is illegal under India's own legislation. That is crucial, and I shall refer to it later. I do not underestimate the difficulty of shifting patterns of behaviour that are inseparable from the social and political history of India, and the cultural patterns and prejudices involved. Nor do I underestimate the sensitivity of external voices, here or elsewhere, seeking from afar to influence conditions on the ground. However, as the hon. Member for Islington, North and the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Rob Marris) made abundantly clear, the need for urgent action is now overwhelming.

In addition to the excellent points already made, I want emphasise the ways in which fruitful activity could be undertaken. Given that the nature of the abuses suffered by the Dalit community are intimately associated with long-standing prejudices shared by many millions of Indians from other **castes**, the need to tackle in the classroom the nature of some fundamental prejudices is of paramount importance. Again, I do not underestimate how difficult it is to do that from the outside, but every effort should be taken by the Department for International Development, the European Union and all other donor organisations—they provide assistance to the tune of several hundred million pounds for the Indian education system—to associate aid closely with the requirement to tackle underlying cultural and social prejudices that sustain that level of human rights abuse over such a long period. I am keen to hear whether the Minister thinks that anything can be done, through bilateral and multilateral aid, to influence the way in which the problem is tackled in classrooms in schools in villages and cities throughout India.

It is worth reiterating how clear and unambiguous India's legislation is on that point. The Library briefing—excellent, as ever—says:

"Article 17 of the Constitution of India states that the practice of 'untouchability' is abolished and forbidden."

Legislation to criminalise abuses against so-called scheduled **castes** and tribes began in 1955 with the Protection of Civil Rights Act. That was supplemented by the enactment of the Scheduled **Castes** and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act in 1989 and, most recently, the rules of 1995, which extended the scope of abuses that were criminalised and provided for ever graver penalties.

The protection afforded to the Dalit and scheduled **castes** and tribes in those Acts is extensive—I would even use the word "progressive". They include, for instance, the provision of legal aid and travel expenses for witnesses and victims attending trials. However, the fact that the legislation, which stipulates the constitutional requirement and prohibits the abuses suffered by the Dalit community, is ignored by the police and courts is of legitimate external concern. We even have the perverse example of other laws—the National Security Act, the Explosives Act and sections of the Indian penal code—being invoked to override those protections. Given that the abuses are taking place and that they fly directly in the face of the legal protections incorporated in the constitution and Indian law, it is right that the moral outrage that we all feel, because of the nature of the abuses suffered, is also directed at the simple failure to abide by the rule of law, which is one of the founding principles of all mature democracies.

Rob Marris : The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. As a solicitor, when I was in Punjab, I visited the courts in Chandigarh, the state capital, which are conducted in English. The Dalit people are, not by law but by practice and poverty, excluded from learning English, so, as he says, their chances of enforcing their legal rights are nil.

Mr. Clegg : The hon. Gentleman has a much greater insight from his personal experiences than I do. What he says merely reinforces the fact that the law is an empty shell if those who are victimised cannot seek legal recourse through the courts, because of linguistic or other barriers. The claim on the democratic credentials of a mature democracy, which India is—it is the largest democracy in the world—will always be challenged and will appear threadbare so long as the legal protections on the statute book that are afforded to so many millions of people are not fully connected.

My final point, which I direct to the Minister, is a political one. If a lot of work needs to be done from the bottom up, particularly in the classroom, it is equally true that pressure needs to be brought from the top down. Given the scale of the abuses suffered in India, and to a numerically lesser degree in Nepal and Pakistan, we want the problem of **caste** discrimination to be featured at every bilateral meeting at political level between the United Kingdom and India, and between the European Union and India. Recently, there was an EU-India summit—or whatever it was called—which the Minister no doubt attended. Was the subject raised? If not, what measures can he take to ensure that future EU presidencies make sure that **caste** discrimination becomes a permanent, political irritant, from India's point of view, and a persistent feature in bilateral and multilateral discussions, in the same way as human rights issues are raised in our dialogues with many other countries around the world?

11.48 am

Andrew Selous (South-West Bedfordshire) (Con): This is the third time in three years that I have had the chance to speak in this Chamber on **caste** discrimination, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to do so again. I join hon. Members in warmly congratulating the hon. Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) on securing the debate. I hope that it will not be the last such debate and that there will be an ongoing dialogue to ensure that the subject stays firmly at the top of the international political agenda.

Caste discrimination is clearly a subject that unites hon. Members on both sides of the House. Meritocracy, opportunity for all, fairness, a free and open labour market, and the belief that the only bar to our social and economic advancement is our ability, not to whom or where we were born, are a fundamental part of my conservatism. A healthy market economy depends on free movement of labour, and **caste** discrimination fundamentally disrupts that. We need to do something about that key aspect of social justice.

A **caste** system is one where a person's occupation and social status are defined by their birth, and it exists in many countries. We heard a great deal about India, but my research has revealed that **caste**-based systems also exist in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Algeria, Libya, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mauretania, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Senegal, Somalia and Sri Lanka. That is quite a list, so we should not only pay attention to India. **Caste** discrimination affects the whole of south Asia and many countries in Africa, principally in west Africa.

India has constitutional protection for equality. It has criminalised discrimination, for which we are grateful. However, as in so many areas of government, it is one thing to get laws on to the statute book, but it is another to ensure that those laws are enforced and that law enforcement agencies adhere to both the letter and the spirit of the law.

I am pleased that the United Nations is starting to take the problem more seriously, because it certainly must do so. It is long overdue in paying serious attention to **caste** discrimination. A session of the working group on minorities took place in Geneva on 30 May at the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. The UN has appointed two special rapporteurs, Mr. Yokota and Ms Chin-Sung Chung. They have been tasked with preparing a comprehensive study on discrimination that is based on descent and work. Furthermore, the UN special rapporteur on racism, Mr. Doudou Diène, has stated that **caste** discrimination is a problem of racism. It is good to hear that formal acknowledgement that **caste** is an issue of race.

As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Rob Marris) said, India's report to the United Nations is long overdue. It has been required since about 1997 or 1998. It is fair for the Government to ask the United Nations when we will see that report and when it will be acted on. I am interested to hear how the Government will ensure that the European Union, on our behalf, takes effective action through its appointment of a rapporteur to look into **caste** discrimination.

It is worth talking about what **caste** discrimination means in everyday life for those who suffer from it. The Dalits, or, as they have been known, the untouchables, represent more than one sixth of India's population. That is 160 million people. Many endure almost complete social ostracisation. Many cannot cross the dividing line from their part of the village to that occupied by higher **castes**.

They cannot use the same wells, visit the same temples or even drink from the same cups in tea stalls. Dalit children are often made to sit at the back of classrooms. In what has been called India's hidden apartheid, entire villages in many Indian states are completely segregated by **caste**.

We know that the Indian Government often allocates separate facilities to separate, **caste**-based neighbourhoods. Dalits often receive poorer facilities, if, indeed, they receive any facilities at all. In many villages, the state administration installs electricity, sanitation facilities and water pumps in the upper-**caste** section but neglect to do the same in the neighbouring, segregated Dalit area. Basic amenities such as water taps and wells are also segregated. Medical facilities are often available only in the higher-**caste** areas.

India's constitution contains reservation or **caste**-based quota policies that were supposed to deal with the situation and improve it. The constitution reserves 22.5 per cent of federal Government jobs, seats in state legislatures, seats in the lower House of Parliament and jobs in educational institutions for scheduled **castes** and tribes. Again, it is on the implementation and enforcement of that policy that things have fallen down. If one examines the percentages to see what the Dalit representation is in those areas, one finds that it is much lower than the 22.5 per cent that is specified in Indian law.

During election campaigns in India—the world's largest democracy—there is de facto disfranchisement of Dalit communities much of the time. In February 1998, police raided a Dalit village in Tamil Nadu that had boycotted national parliamentary elections. In Bihar, to ensure their majority vote from the Dalit community, political candidates sent in civilian militias whose members intimidated and killed. More than 50 people were killed in elections in Bihar in 1995.

We heard that during natural disasters separate facilities and even separate refugee camps are set up for Dalits. There are serious questions to be asked about how tsunami aid, which was given in good faith by the people and Government of this country, was distributed. It is unbelievable that the issue of **caste** comes into play even in the face of appalling natural disasters. The allocation of relief aid is one situation in which one would hope that our common humanity would be uppermost and issues of **caste** would not apply.

The consequences of having a relationship or marrying outside one's **caste** are severe. On 6 August 2001, in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, an upper-**caste** Brahmin boy and a lower-**caste** Jat girl were dragged to the roof of a house and publicly hanged by members of their own families as hundreds of spectators looked on. The public lynching was a punishment for refusing to end an inter-**caste** relationship. In May 2000, in the Hardoi district in Uttar Pradesh, a police constable who was enraged by his daughter's marriage to a Dalit was joined by other relatives in shooting and killing four members of his son-in-law's family. In Nepal, some Dalits who married people of higher **caste** have reportedly been imprisoned by local authorities because of false cases filed against them by members of the upper-**caste** families. Obviously, that raises severe concerns about the justice system in Nepal. Dalits are often forbidden from performing marriage or funeral rites in public areas or, in some areas, from speaking to members of upper **castes**.

On debt bondage and slavery, in many parts of the world Dalits are only allowed to perform certain tasks and occupations, which are often badly paid, and in many cases they become slaves. The hon. Member for Wolverhampton, South-West was right to equate **caste** discrimination with slavery. There are many examples in which there are strong similarities between the two. That should give

us all pause for thought and should cause serious concern in this country as we approach a significant anniversary as far as Wilberforce is concerned. Again, those problems are due to the lack of enforcement in India of relevant legislation preventing debt bondage. We should be seriously concerned about that.

I mentioned education. There are high Dalit drop-out rates from education. We should consider that.

Jeremy Corbyn : Does the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that in addition to there being poor education for Dalits and a high drop-out rate, large numbers of Dalit children end up being exploited as child labourers in all kinds of dangerous situations, such as brick making? Of course, that contributes to the complete lack of education for most of them.

Andrew Selous : The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and his point comes back to what I said about debt bondage. On education, the literacy gap between the Dalits and the rest of the population is significant. Almost two thirds of the Dalit population is illiterate, compared with half of the general population. That statistic demonstrates the concern well.

On freedom of religion, it is hardly surprising that some Dalits have wanted to move away from Hinduism because of the place that it has accorded them in society. Again, there are concerns about that, which I raised in Westminster Hall in January 2003. In the state of Tamil Nadu, a law was passed to ban conversions by, as the legislation calls it, "force or fraud." However, the leader of the militant Hindu group, RSS, claimed recently that no one converts voluntarily; it is always motivated by greed. The law is aimed, frankly, at stopping Dalits converting from Hinduism to other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, which is something that many have wanted to do. The state authorities in Tamil Nadu vigorously opposed a recent conversion rally where a number of Dalits converted to both Christianity and Buddhism. Again, that is a fundamental issue of liberty and conscience, which the Government needs continually to raise.

Jeremy Corbyn : Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that there are attempts to introduce the same kind of law in Sri Lanka, with exactly the same effect?

Andrew Selous : I am interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's point. He is quite right about Sri Lanka. Although the **caste** system in Sri Lanka is often thought to be much less severe than that in India, it still exists. There is a lower **caste** group, called the Rodiya, which still suffers discrimination. I am grateful to him for putting that on the record.

In India, 90 per cent of those who live below the official poverty line are Dalits. If we are to get away from the notion that poverty is predestined to be intergenerationally persistent for certain groups, we need to address that problem. The Government needs to be concerned with that if they are to have any hope of achieving the millennium development goals to which we are all committed.

When, quite rightly, Martin Luther King and others led the black civil rights movement in the United States of America, they did so for a black population of about 35 million, mainly in the southern states of America. When many in this House and outside it joined the struggle to end the abhorrent apartheid regime in South Africa, we did so for an African, coloured, Indian and Asian population of about 42 million. We were also quite right to do so. When some 300 million people worldwide suffer **caste** discrimination on an ongoing basis, it is unacceptable that the international

community looks the other way, turns a blind eye and has not pushed the issue higher up the international agenda.

This is an issue for our generation. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Islington, North for having secured the debate, to the Dalit social forum in India for its work, to the work of Dalit Solidarity Network UK and to the UK churches that are starting to take the issue seriously. Their interest is important and significant, and I hope that their pressure, along with that of all Members of the House, will continue to ensure that the Government take the issue seriously. If we are, in this year, to make poverty history, we have no choice but to end **caste** discrimination, as segregation in the USA and apartheid in South Africa have been ended.

We look forward to hearing what specific steps the Government can take in their dealings with international organisations, such as the European Union and the United Nations, and bilaterally with the many countries concerned, to ensure that the issue stays firmly at the top of the political agenda.

12.5 pm

The Minister for Europe (Mr. Douglas Alexander): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Jeremy Corbyn) for calling this debate. Let me begin by placing on the record my personal admiration for his efforts over several years on this issue. He has been supported by the Rev. David Haslam, the Dalit Solidarity Network and, as a colleague recognised, a growing number of British Church people who, quite reasonably, are greatly concerned about the injustice. Their campaign has been worthwhile. This is one of several Adjournment debates on the subject and I regret and fear that it will not be the last, as we face an enduring challenge. None the less, it is right to recognise the campaigners' considerable efforts to bring the issue to the attention not just of the Government but of the wider audience in the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) challenged me to offer specific measures. I hope that he will exercise some forbearance and allow me to set out some general points before I address the wide range of questions that were put to me by each speaker in turn.

The Government firmly believes that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set out in the universal declaration of human rights, without discrimination of any kind. Discrimination based on descent, to give it the title used by the UN convention on the elimination of all forms of racial discrimination, encapsulates discrimination based on forms of social stratification—**caste** or similar systems of inherited status—that impair a person's equal enjoyment of their human rights. **Caste** discrimination of the type found in India, which has featured prominently in this debate, is the most well-known example of discrimination based on descent. In that system, in which social mobility is severely limited and status is completely ascribed, the Dalits, or untouchables, about whose plight we have heard so much this morning, suffer multiple forms of discrimination and are typically assigned tasks or occupations that are considered filthy or polluting.

However, it is not only in south or south-east Asia that **caste**-like practices, including discrimination based on occupation and descent from slaves, are found. As we have heard today, they are also found in other parts of the world such as Africa. The discrimination suffered by such communities takes the form of a variety of human rights violations, including the lack of ability to alter inherited status; restrictions on marriage outside the community; private and public segregation in housing, health and education, and in access to public spaces, places of worship and even sources of food

and water; inability to renounce inherited occupations or degrading or hazardous work; subjection to debt bondage; subjection to dehumanising references such as "polluting" or "untouchable"; and a general lack of respect for their human dignity and equality.

Discrimination based on **caste** or descent determines an individual's position in the social and economic hierarchy, not on the basis of merit but of heritage. It perpetuates social exclusion and reduces the rate at which poverty reduction can be achieved, as the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire said. The framework of international covenants and national legislation outlawing discrimination based on descent is an important step towards its elimination, but it has not been enough, as the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr. Clegg) pointed out.

As we all know, such practices remain all too entrenched despite the many international commitments made by the countries in question. It is therefore important that the international community engages at a more practical level to help to implement such commitments. One example of engagement is the child health programme: the Department for International Development has worked with the Indian Ministry of Health to develop targets for including Dalit and Adivasi women and children in the programme. It has worked hard with other donors to develop a monitoring system and incentives to ensure that such women are included. DFID supports similar initiatives in education and other areas.

It is clear that deep-rooted social attitudes and customs must also change. Of course, that is a much more difficult task, as was recognised by some of the speakers this morning. We welcome the fact that that is beginning to happen through natural social change. Migration, urbanisation, greater contacts with other societies and new forms of employment all have an effect, but we can and must do more. **We must encourage states, for example, to be proactive in tackling prejudice and changing behaviour to ensure that socially excluded groups benefit from public expenditure and have access to services such as health care and education.**

Some hon. Members raised the question of tsunami relief in that context. The British public gave to that cause in record numbers almost a year ago, as did the Government. Unfortunately, media reports suggest that Dalits have experienced discrimination and difficulties in gaining access to emergency aid, but the Foreign Office's assessment is that that has been localised and complex, rather than universal. For DFID, I understand that emergency funding and first-stage rehabilitation require a demonstration of an appreciation of social issues and a strategy for addressing the issue of **caste** discrimination when targeting aid.

The hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire brought to the attention of the House the full range of countries where the practices we have been discussing exist, and my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North spoke about **Senegal**. We understand that there is a form of **caste** system in that country based on occupation, affecting blacksmiths and griots—traditional troubadours—in particular, and that marriage outside the **caste** system is strongly discouraged. An offer that I can make to my hon. Friend is that **I will ask our desk officer in the relevant embassy to raise his concerns and write to my hon. Friend about the specific matter that he raised.**

I was asked what action we are taking through the United Nations or European Union. We and our EU partners are of course committed to the promotion of all people's human rights and we continue to raise the subject of discrimination based on work and descent in our meetings with the Governments of the affected countries. The Prime Minister, as president of the EU, led the EU-

Indian summit at Delhi on 7 September. During the summit an **EU-India joint action plan** was agreed, identifying key areas in which the EU and India agree to work together, and one such area, I am glad to say, is human rights. **The UK presidency is planning to take that human rights dialogue forward before the end of the year and is consulting EU partners and the Government of India on the form, content and date of the dialogue. The British high commission in New Delhi has also discussed the issues with the Indian National Commission for Minorities and National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, as well as state level authorities, drawing their attention to British parliamentary and public concern. It will continue to do so.**

My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North raised the Ambedkar principles. We are aware of the work that the International Dalit Solidarity Network has undertaken. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West (Rob Marris) for raising the specific challenge to British business that was contained in the documentation provided. I should be grateful, however, if the network provided the Foreign Office with a comprehensive outline of the proposals, as we have only the summary document that my hon. Friend mentioned.

Jeremy Corbyn: I can confirm that the Dalit Solidarity Network would be delighted to provide the Minister with full documentation and details. It will give a personal briefing if he would like one. In return, I hope that, after consideration, my right hon. Friend would be prepared **to hold a serious seminar with British investors in India to discuss how they might best advance anti-discrimination legislation that applies in this country and about their attitude to where they invest.**

Mr. Alexander: The challenge is complex. I do not claim that the complexity of British government quite matches the scale of that challenge, but as my hon. Friend will know, **the Department of Trade and Industry leads on the issue of corporate social responsibility. There is a locus for the Trade Minister in the Foreign Office**, who is not present in the Chamber today. I shall certainly pass on my hon. Friend's request. **I am aware that in the past Ministers have raised the question of foreign investors' corporate social responsibility and I shall offer my hon. Friend's suggestion to my colleagues.**

Andrew Selous: I apologise for asking the Minister a question that I did not raise in my speech; I shall understand if he needs to confer with ministerial colleagues before he replies to me. We have heard a few examples today suggesting that **caste** discrimination is being practised in the UK. Given that the Equality Bill is before the House at the moment, will the Minister undertake to raise the issue with his colleagues in the Department of Trade and Industry so that we can be absolutely sure that if **caste** discrimination is occurring in the UK, an amendment covering that issue can be tabled?

Mr. Alexander: The hon. Gentleman anticipates the more general point to which I was coming about the evidence that would need to be produced. To add further to the layers of complexity, I think that the Home Office would be involved in what he suggests, given its responsibility for the single equality commission. I happily undertake to make my colleagues in the Home Office aware of the points raised.

Of course we are concerned by reports of discrimination against Dalit and other minority communities in India—as I said, the British high commission in New Delhi has raised them on

various occasions. During the meeting of the Commission on Human Rights, the European Union expressed concern about discrimination based on **caste** and supported the decision to appoint two special rapporteurs to prepare a detailed study on discrimination based on work and descent.

The fight against racism, xenophobia and discrimination against minorities and indigenous people is a priority for funding under the European initiative for democracy and human rights. A call for proposals was launched in January 2005. The projects selected will provide a concrete follow-up to the Durban declaration and programme of action of 2001, and activities to combat **caste** discrimination are eligible for support. Oxfam, along with other local partners, is already running one such project in Nepal.

Let me respond to a couple of the other points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North about **how the United Kingdom Government contribute to persuading the Indian Government to make their report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Race Discrimination**. As we heard this morning, that report is now eight years overdue. A prompt submission of reports to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Race Discrimination by all state parties is a key part of the international framework to combat discrimination, and we are therefore concerned about the delay in India's reporting. It is right that we encourage authorities to submit prompt and comprehensive reports, including on the situation of scheduled **castes**. **Together with our European Union partners, we will continue to take every suitable opportunity to make clear our collective concerns on this and related matters. We aim to discuss that with our European Union partners when putting together the proposed human rights dialogue**, of which I spoke a few moments ago, and we anticipate that that will take place towards the end of this year.

I was asked whether there had been **any follow-up to the UN Commission on Human Rights study in 2004** and whether the United Kingdom could encourage that to be brought forward. **At the Commission on Human Rights, the European Union expressed concern about discrimination based on caste and supported the decision to appoint two special rapporteurs of the sub-commission**, about whom we heard from the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire, **to prepare a detailed study on discrimination based on work and descent**. Since then, the experts have been working with the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights on what they are permitted to do under their mandate. In particular, they would like, I understand, to hold regional consultations—ideally in the Indian subcontinent, Japan and West Africa, and possibly Senegal. The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has told them that it does not think that they can organise UN consultations, given that that was not explicitly provided for in the mandate. Strictly speaking, from a financial perspective, that may be correct, as **no consultations were provided for in the budget approved for the study, but the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights is considering whether to hold such consultations and fund them from some other part of the budget**.

Jeremy Corbyn: At next year's United Nations Commission on Human Rights session in Geneva, will there be some way by which either the UK Government or the European Union could raise the matter that we have been discussing, perhaps by initiating the consultation at that venue to encourage the more local consultations to take place later?

Mr. Alexander : **The first priority is to make sure that the special rapporteurs are able to do their work.** Although I shall certainly bear in mind my hon. Friend's suggestion, it seems to me that

the first priority is **to support the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in its efforts to make sure that if there is an alternative means by which that work can be undertaken in the meantime**, that should be a priority. For the time being, the rapporteurs have been working on a questionnaire on the issue to distribute to all missions, which I understand should be ready for distribution by the end of November.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam raised a related question: **what has the United Kingdom done on caste discrimination during its presidency of the European Union?** It is right to recognise that **the Prime Minister, as president of the European Union, took part in the summit in Delhi on 7 September**, during which an EU-India joint action plan was also agreed. One of the areas under question was human rights. The form, content and date of the dialogue is still under discussion with our European Union partners, but it is possible that the reporting and access for the special rapporteurs could form part of that consultation. **I will reflect on the points that have been put to me today as we take forward our discussion with European Union partners on that human rights dialogue.**

More generally, the hon. Gentleman said that there was a challenge in working with the Indian Government to ensure not only that the international pressure is felt, but that domestic action is taken. One specific issue that was raised was the need for access to justice, and I am glad to say that specific action is being taken in that respect. **The Department for International Development is making good progress on its partnership with the United Nations Development Programme and the Indian Government in developing the access to justice programme**, which has recently been approved by the Ministry of Home Affairs and is now awaiting final approval from the Ministry of Finance to move to full design.

To assist and to inform colleagues, I will say that **the aim of the programme is to achieve real access to justice for poor and vulnerable groups in India, including Dalits**. To that end, DFID India has contacts at various levels in the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, and also with other groups and institutions that work on Dalit issues. The views and issues of poor and vulnerable groups, including Dalits, will be the driving force behind the design and implementation of the access to justice programme.

I was asked **what the Indian Government was doing to help Dalits to get a better education**, as well as access to the system of justice. **One of the preceding contributions recognised that under the reservation provision India's quota system reserves approximately 26 per cent of Government jobs in India for Dalits and other tribal groups. The aim is to bring them into the political and social mainstream.** I understand that there are also reserved places in the education system for the same groups.

The hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam will appreciate that his specific point on conditionality of aid extends far beyond one country or one specific issue. I make an offer on behalf of my colleagues in DFID: perhaps they can write to him to deal with the general issue of conditionality in light of today's specific suggestion.

The problem of **caste-based** or descent-based discrimination manifests itself in a range of thematic areas, including contemporary slavery, racism, religious discrimination, poverty reduction, and social exclusion. That means that there are many angles from which to raise, and to tackle, this issue. Wherever poverty adversely affects people's enjoyment of their rights, we support country-

led development agendas. We also encourage partner Governments to develop policies to take into account the needs of all groups in society.

A striking feature of **caste** discrimination is its intersection with bonded labour, where a person is required to give their labour as security for a loan. With literally nothing else on offer, that person is open to exploitation and is trapped into working for little or no pay until the debt is repaid. Sometimes, entire families are bonded or debts are passed down through generations. I say that with some personal feeling, given that when I was the Minister in the Foreign Office with responsibility for south Asia I had the privilege of visiting a DFID-funded project in Nepal. It provides land and a means of sustenance for former bonded labourers through the freed Kamaiya food security programme. It has supported a number of activities including income generation, scholarships and access to drinking water and sanitation, in partnership with international, national and local non-governmental organisations. The work continues through a number of smaller-scale projects under the community support programme.

Mention of Nepal reminds me of the earlier point that my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton, South-West raised **in respect of the Gurkhas**. I am aware that recruitment takes place in Nepal, but I was unaware of the specific issue that he identifies. I give an undertaking that **I will raise that matter with the relevant Minister in the Ministry of Defence**.

I can assure hon. Members that the Government takes this issue seriously. It is an issue on which, not least on the basis of the discussion that we have had today, there is great strength of feeling in this House. I know of the concern that is felt not only by Members of this House but by the many campaigners outside the House who have brought the issue to the attention of parliamentarians. That is why I offer this assurance: we will continue in our efforts to address the poverty, injustice and discrimination to which this issue contributes.