

Doco highlights hidden caste discrimination

By Bernadette Rae

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The world has long turned a blind eye to the planet's most monumental abuse of individual human rights perpetrated in India by its caste system. Murders, rapes and arson are frequently committed there with no fear of punishment because the crimes are only against Dalits, or "Untouchables".

The world also rarely stops to question the fact that in the largest of all "democracies", 75 per cent of top government positions are filled by Brahmins, the caste at the apex of India's strictly hierarchical social order.

Casteism was made illegal in India's constitution, in 1949. But in practice it remains firmly and often violently entrenched. Now it is being exported to the West.

Even in egalitarian New Zealand, the discriminatory practices of ancient India are flourishing and there are people here whose lives are blighted daily by the Dalit/Untouchable label.

"The Indian community is my community, I am part of it, I live in it – and I see it," says Mandrika Rupa, film-maker turned political and social commentator.

Her latest work, *Hidden Apartheid: A Report on Caste Discrimination*, is a 70-minute documentary, five years in the making and featuring research done in the United States, Britain, Australia and New Zealand as well as her native India.

It will have its first showing tomorrow at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London, before an audience of interviewees in the film, groups such as Castewatch UK and other anti-caste advocates, human rights organisations and politicians who have been working on England's Single Equality Bill.

Those fighting casteism in Britain hope that the bill will eventually include caste as a category alongside gender, race, sex and disability.

Rupa, a former social worker both in New Zealand and Britain, has seen casteism at work in shops, places of worship, institutions of all kinds and in politics, eating places and universities in the west.

"Arranged marriages which are epitomised by caste identity are still the norm," she says. "Just look at the advertisements for marriage partners."

She recently observed two women in an Indian emporium in Auckland being asked their caste and then being treated off-handedly and offered only inferior goods by the shop assistant. Rupa intervened.



Mandrika Rupa. Photo / Martin Sykes.

"Or an Indian woman working in a bank might be promoted to supervisor, on merit, only to find other workers who consider themselves of superior cast refusing to operate under her," she says.

Recently on a film set in New Zealand, an Indian actress brought her own "girl servant" and was physically abusing her. The New Zealand crew witnessing this were traumatised and did not know how to intervene.

The film documents ongoing caste conflicts throughout the West and highlights the struggle of those fighting it. Although caste-based discrimination is being challenged in Britain through legislation, there are no such moves in New Zealand, Australia or the United States.

The documentary also examines in lucid detail how caste originated in Indian society, how it became entrenched in social practices and how its practice has spread to all large Indian communities in the West, while remaining invisible to those outside those communities.

It highlights how the Manu Smriti, the legal text of ancient India written by Brahmin scholars thousands of years ago, is still viewed as God's own word, and quoted to justify Brahmin superiority and ownership. It discusses the impact of karma, a concept used to explain a poor situation in life as the result of misdeeds in a previous existence.

"According to Manu all women are 'Untouchables'," says Rupa. "So the traditional laws of India control women as well as poor people and these vicious social codes are having a resurgence today, under the name of culture, even though they are often illegal."

After its London debut, Hidden Apartheid, directed and produced by Rupa with New Zealand company Attar Films, will be shown on the international film festival circuit and at a private showing in New York, before being released for commercial distribution.

There are no immediate plans for its screening in New Zealand but more information and a trailer can be found at www.hiddenapartheid-themovie.com.

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