

'I couldn't get the bank job I wanted. When my father died I took his job as a sweeper'



Roadsweeper Arvind Vaghela has a master's degree in economics. He is a low-caste Dalit, so bias confines him to the menial work his family has always done. Photograph by Pablo Bartholomew of netphotograph.com

# Untouchables in new battle for jobs

India's lowest class raises its sights from the gutter

by Randeep Ramesh  
Ahmedabad

FLANKED by green cricket fields where he once played and a university from which he graduated, Arvind Vaghela tries not to notice the stream of students walking past. 'I used to be like them, attending lectures and going out on the fields. But now I just hide my face,' he said.

The reason for his shame is the broom in his hand. Despite a masters degree in economics from Gujarat University in Ahmedabad, the best job Vaghela, 24, could get was one done by generations of his family: roadsweeper.

'I wanted to work in sales for a bank, but you needed to have your own vehicle. I come from a poor family, so how could I afford that? When my father died I was offered

his job and I took it,' he said. As a Dalit, or untouchable, Vaghela's story is familiar in this sprawling west Indian city. Nearly 100 of its council sanitation workers have degrees in subjects ranging from computing to law, but cannot get better jobs because they are Dalits.

Their experience is part of an increasingly heated debate in India, where the government has announced that it will consider extending public-sector job quotas for people from the lowest castes to the private sector.

Industrialists, who insist private-sector jobs and promotions are earned on merit, say that this will make businesses inefficient and uncompetitive.

Rahul Bajaj, who chairs a large motorcycle manufacturer, wrote in the *Times of*

*India* that public-sector job quotas had reduced the 'effectiveness of government' because decisions were not made on the basis of ability.

This argument leaves Ahmedabad's roadsweeping graduates unimpressed. Most say that they have had to face discrimination or exploitation in the booming private sector.

'I got a job with a firm of accountants and then had to present my qualifications. On one school certificate it mentioned my caste.

'The next day I was told there had been a mistake - I was not required any more,' said Dalit sweeper Prakash Chauhan, 32, who has a degree in commerce.

Chauhan stresses he is relatively well paid, at 4,000 rupees (£50) a month, and his job is secure. 'This is a job for life. But it was my father's life. Our parents had a dream that education would mean we would not have to do the jobs they did. It did not turn out that way.'

Dalits, the lowest caste, have endured centuries of discrimination and violence because of a social order that consigns them and their descendants to jobs nobody else wants to do and a tradition that all humans are created unequal.

In rural India Dalits have been murdered for proposing to marry somebody further up the social ladder, barred from temples, forced into bonded labour and made to carry human waste from the homes of high-caste Hindus.

In the cities, where it is easier to change one's name and slip into the crowd, Dalits say economic exclusion is now the biggest issue.

The ingrained unfairness of the caste system has brought pressure for reform on human rights grounds against Western firms doing business in India. Unions have written to 300 companies in Europe which outsource work to India to check that their subcontractors do not discriminate on the basis of caste.

'There are many parallels with the situation in South Africa in the Sixties, when for-

eign companies needed to be persuaded to address the discrimination in the system of apartheid,' said David Haslam, the London-based chair of the Dalit Solidarity Network.

Chandra Bhan Prasad, a Dalit writer who has proposed many new affirmative action programmes in India, says businesses should look for inspiration to the United States, where firms carry out diversity audits and give contracts to firms from minority groups.

'About a fifth of General Motors managers are African American, Hispanic or Native American. GM actually goes out of its way to recruit from these communities. The company also places \$2 billion of business into the minority communities. No Indian business has done the same.'

These measures helped to create a black middle class, he says, making African Americans part of mainstream life in the US. By contrast, Prasad says, if Oprah Winfrey had been born in India she would have remained chained to poverty rather than become one of the world's richest women.

'Here family connections and caste matter more than ability. It is still the case of who you know, not what you can do.'

'In the US you have black billionaires, industrialists, black film stars, black professors. In India university professorships are closed to us. We do not have one Dalit millionaire. There is not one Dalit newspaper editor, nor a Dalit newscaster.'

Academics caution, however, that there is one big difference between race and Indian caste. 'No one can tell from your appearance that you are a Dalit. The same cannot be said for African Americans,' says Shyam Babu, a research fellow at the Rajiv Gandhi Institute, a think-tank in New Delhi.

'It is more subtle. Once you know someone's name and where they are from, most Indians can identify your caste. The basic bigotry is the same: you assume an entire ethnic group is incompetent.'

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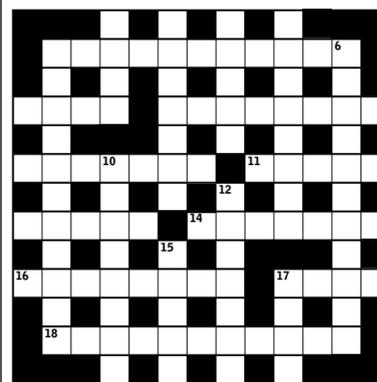
### Speedy crossword No. 473

#### ACROSS

- 5 Belfry (6,5)  
7 In a frenzy (4)  
8 Rehearse (8)  
9 Tongue of a bell (7)  
11 Landing stage (5)  
13 Shrewd (5)  
14 Flightless bird (7)  
16 Grass cutter (8)  
17 Cross piece on wicket (4)  
18 Distraction (11)

#### DOWN

- 1 Pout (4)  
2 Ruin, put paid to (7)  
3 Wander (5)  
4 Bird watcher (8)  
5 Intricate, difficult (11)  
6 Limiting, confining (11)  
10 Prioritise (3,5)  
12 Impute (7)  
15 Inspire (5)  
17 Distorted (4)



#### Solution No. 472

- Across:  
1 Stammer  
8 Upright  
9 Litotes  
10 Tussaud  
11 Error  
13 Encourage  
15 Fluctuate  
18 Graft  
21 Residue  
22 Niobium  
23 Gleaned  
24 Appoint  
Down:  
1 Salve  
2 Actor  
3 Mature student  
4 Rustic  
5 Pressure group  
6 Igwana  
7 Stodge  
12 Reel  
14 Gulf  
15 Forage  
16 Ulster  
17 Agenda  
19 Alibi  
20 Tempt

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