

Couple 'lost jobs' for love across a divide

First caste discrimination case is heard

Dominic Kennedy Investigations Editor

They fell in love across an ancient divide and endured humiliation, hostility and the loss of their jobs and prospects, a young couple claimed at a tribunal yesterday, in a test case showing how the Indian caste system affects lives in contemporary Britain.

The man, from the lower caste known as the "Untouchables" or Dalits, was a practice manager at a law firm, where he met his future wife. She, like her employers, comes from a higher caste. The couple are claiming

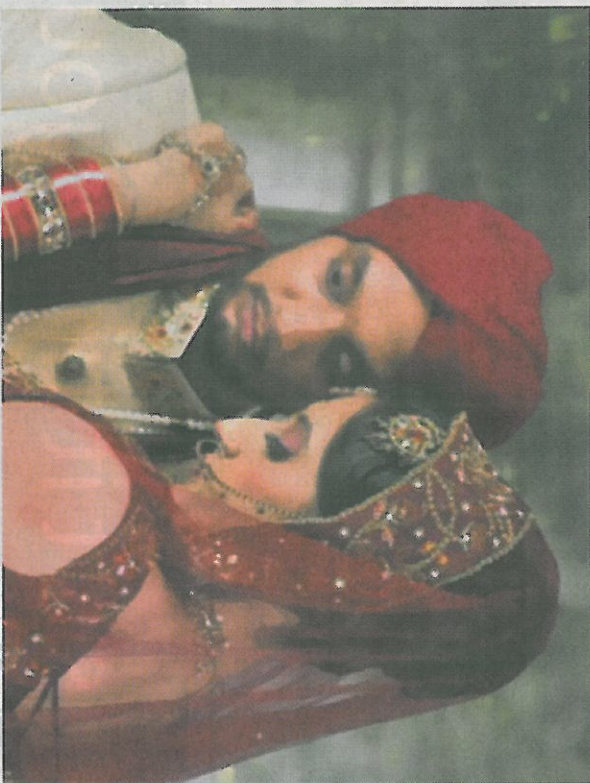
Forbidden love: no redress for couples divided by caste

How The Times first reported the case

wrongful dismissal after stating that they were discriminated against on the ground of caste.

The case comes as Theresa May, the Home Secretary, is considering whether to add the caste system to race, sex, religion and sexuality in British equality law.

In a quiet voice, Amandeep Begraj, 33, gave evidence describing how her career and health had been blighted when an inter-caste office romance upset her employers. Bosses at Heer Manak, a Coventry-based firm of solicitors, allegedly tried to discourage the couple from marrying. Even at her wedding, in a Sikh temple, hurtful remarks were passed about how she



JOAH GERARD / SWNS.COM FOR THE TIMES

Vijay and Amandeep Begraj at their wedding, and, below right, yesterday

was marrying beneath her caste: the Jats, an agrarian people originating from Punjab.

The employers, who have been brought before the employment tribunal in Birmingham, are understood to regard the allegations as outrageous.

Mrs Begraj told the hearing that she worked with Vijay, 32, for four years and socialised with him and colleagues before their friendship became more serious. When her employers found out about the blossoming relationship,

was paid less than other solicitors. On her wedding day, one colleague "raised a toast to Jat girls going down the drain," she said.

Mr Begraj worked for the solicitors for seven years until he was dismissed last year. His wife resigned last January.

After an article appeared in *The Times* featuring the couple's story their car windscreen was smashed, even though they had been given false names to protect their identities.

The article, headlined "Forbidden love" and published in July last year, described how Mrs Begraj had privately given evidence to the House of Lords, which helped to persuade peers to pass a law giving ministers the power to ban caste discrimination.

The couple are the first to make a formal claim of caste discrimination but the tribunal may decide that they have been discriminated against on the ground of religion or race because Mrs Begraj is a Sikh and her husband Hindu.

Mrs May has yet to exercise her powers to outlaw this type of discrimination. Reformers were dismayed when the Government referred the issue for public consultation in its "Red Tape Challenge", which aims to reduce bureaucracy for employers.

The Home Secretary is considering responses. The tribunal hearing continues. dkennedy@thetimes.co.uk

Lives can be blighted today

Behind the story

They were known to the British Empire as the "Untouchables", call themselves the Dalits, and are contemptibly described by bigoted Indians as "choora", a term as insulting as "nigger" is to black people (Dominic Kennedy writes).

In Britain today there are between 50,000 and 200,000 people from this lowest rung on the caste ladder and their lives can be blighted by prejudice, cruelty and violence.

A generation ago the few Untouchables arriving on these shores found Britain a haven where they were treated with the same respect as everybody else.

Today mass immigration has resulted in 5 per cent of the British population originating from the sub-continent. Many businesses are now run by Indians and the caste system has taken root here.

An investigation by *The Times* last year found that young people born here were adopting their caste as part of their identity. Britain's thriving bhangra music scene was created by Jats, an agrarian caste with a tradition of making music for harvest festivals. Brahmins, the highest caste, have social groups for young people to mix and match.