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## Indian children boycott school lunches cooked by 'Untouchable'

By Andrew Buncombe in Delhi  
Tuesday, 18 December 2007

By her own admission, the lunches cooked by Phool Kumari Rawat may not always be the tastiest food the pupils at her school have ever eaten. And with more than 300 students to cook for, getting the proportions right can be a struggle.

But the children of Bibipur Primary and Junior High School near Lucknow have not launched a boycott of Mrs Rawat's food because of its taste, but because Mrs Rawat is a Dalit, a so-called Untouchable. As a result, they say, the food is unclean.

Such incidents are not uncommon in India, where caste remains a debilitating and divisive phenomenon, especially for those 75 per cent of people who live in rural communities. But the boycott at Bibipur is especially noteworthy because it is taking place in Uttar Pradesh (UP), the state which this year elected a Dalit woman, Mayawati Kumari, as its chief minister. Campaigners say that despite Mayawati's poll victory, Dalits still suffer widespread discrimination.

When the boycott of the meals began last week, local officials stood by Mrs Rawat, a widow with three children, and tried to persuade the students that there was nothing unhygienic about her food. Officials who inspected her cooking said there were no problems and one even ate the lunch vegetables and rice in front of the students to persuade them to end their boycott.

But The Indian Express newspaper reports that with the children not backing down from the boycott, the authorities are now poised to sack Mrs Rawat.

A district magistrate, Chandra Bhanu, said: "We have inquired and found that the poor quality of food is a fact. So we will try to concentrate on that issue and find a person who can make better quality food for the children."

Tellingly, children who live in Mrs Rawat's neighbourhood are still eating the lunches, while those involved in the boycott have reportedly made little effort to hide their reason for refusing to eat. "I will not eat anything cooked by that lady. I have heard my family members say that she is from some low caste. So I bring my own lunch box," said one pupil, Shivani Singh Chauhan.

When Mayawati, who uses only one name and who heads the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), won the state's elections in May, many hoped her victory would help foster equality. But last night, her office failed to respond to questions about the incident at the school and whether it would investigate.

However, Ram Kumar, of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights, said: "There are no equal rights in UP. We have a Dalit chief minister but more than 80 per cent of the bureaucracy are members of the upper caste. There are many villages in UP that are totally dominated by caste and there is not any chance of social equality."

Meanwhile Mrs Rawat, who earns the equivalent of just 75p a day, said: "I am a widow with three kids. Earlier, I worked as a labourer. If they remove me from here I will accept it as my fate and will again work as a labourer."

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