The shame of India

The word “Dalit” raises a blank, and “Untouchable” just a small nod of recognition. Outside India the discrimination against more than 250m people born outside the caste system remains a rumour. Most of those aware of the caste system think it has been abolished. Martin Macwan aims to expose and kick away India’s hidden apartheid.

Macwan, 42, himself a Dalit, has spent his life fighting for the rights of his oppressed peers. He is now a leader in the campaign on Dalit rights throughout India.

The oppression against Dalits ranges from the subtle – Untouchables are not allowed to wear sunglasses or tuck in’ their shirts or ride on their bicycles through the centre of town – to the outrageous. Dalit women are regularly raped by high-caste men – the estimated figure is three rapes around the country a day. Dalits are denied the fields allotted to them under the land reforms inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. They are made to do the work no others would do: scour septic tanks by hand, scrape away years of built up fecal matter, and Dalit women are prostituted to temples, and forced to sleep with high-caste men who outside would not touch their hand in the street. Both practices are illegal under Indian law, but both are widespread.

Macwan began his work in 1981, while still a student, in the villages of his native Gujarat. Later he set up co-operatives where Dalit workers were paid almost four times the government rate. “We were paying 11 rupees a day while the government rate was three rupees,” he says. “This meant that no Dalits were going into the fields of the upper castes. Eventually they were forced to match our wages.”

Then came the recriminations. The gravest of these saw four of his colleagues murdered by a high-caste mob. “Earlier, this sort of incident would not have been reported, but, for the first time, we fought it. Witnesses were called who had never seen the inside of a court, so we held mock trials where we trained them to answer lawyers’ questions. Not a single witness faltered. Fourteen people were given life sentences. This was a massive victory.”