

# Caste discrimination has racial overtones

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It is ironical that in 21st century, New Delhi is not ready to concede that descent-based discrimination is a social curse in India. It is a signal that no degree of modernisation can change the upper caste mindset and exclusionary governing culture in the country.



Mujtaba Khan, Director, Jamia Millia Islamia

In Durban in 2001, the clamour of several Dalit groups to take up the issue with the UN in its conference against racism (WCAR) was turned down for want of empirical evidence to treat caste as a form of discrimination. Curiously, the so-called Indian delegation of 'courtier' MPs (reportedly all Dalits) also certified the Gov stand that there was no caste discrimination per se and the government was sensitive to address Dalit issues through legislative mechanisms and affirmative action. Nevertheless, the UN appointed a Special Rapportuer to India to explore the nature and extent of discrimination in caste hierarchy.

Subsequently, there were extensive research activities and, today, a plethora of empirical evidence on descent-based discrimination is available in organisations like the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies and National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights. What else is left for policy officials to debate further? How many more generations will it take to introduce correctives in the tradition of hierarchical domination?

Those viewing equation of caste with race as a chimera will agree that they coalesce when it comes to practice, be it exclusion, inequality, institutionalised prejudices or discrimination. Sixty-five years are proof that the menace of caste discrimination cannot be fought locally as it is getting fattened while cannibalising on the very notions and institutions that were believed would weaken and eliminate it.

Caste discrimination has acquired racial connotations blatantly violating human rights, therefore, it needs to be addressed. As a large secular democracy committed to social justice and as a signatory to a number of UN human rights agreements; it is morally and legally binding on New Delhi to accept responsibility, at the international forum, for the continuing discrimination against Dalits and its failure to dispense them due justice.

(The writer is Director at Dr KR Narayanan Centre for Dalit and Minorities Studies)

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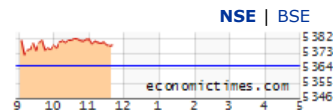
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