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Committed at home, antagonist abroad

Sandeep Dikshit

Activists question India's opposition to new international standards on equality and non-discrimination

NEW DELHI: Even as India is committed to countering caste-based discrimination at home, parliamentarians and social activists have questioned the government's opposition to a new set of international standards on equality and non-discrimination, which includes caste-based inequity.

The Indian opposition led to the new standards — the 2009 Draft Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent — not even being included in the agenda of the current session of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, which ended on Friday, they said.

In a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Rajya Sabha MP Praveen Rashtrapal challenged the official stand that there was no need to include caste in the new standards because this issue was being addressed by the National Commission for Scheduled Castes. Crippled by lack of resources and staff, the body was unable to address most issues facing the Scheduled Castes. Neither did it have binding powers nor could it compel governments to implement its recommendations.

“I am not undermining the work of the Commission or the efforts of the government. Unfortunately India and the world have just missed an important opportunity at the U.N. Human Rights Council to discuss and adopt the 2009 Draft Principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent,” Mr. Rashtrapal said, hoping that the government would make amends at the next session scheduled for in June.

The government's stand did not address the scale and gravity of caste-based discrimination in India. It also reflected a lack of awareness of global human rights standard, he said.

Pointing out that India had the best legislation in the region to counter caste-based discrimination, rights activist Paul Diwakar said the country could have taken the lead in countering this practice in South Asia and Africa.

There was no need for India to take this stand, because it was the Indian delegate who proposed the inclusion of 'descent' in the definition of racial discrimination in the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination when it was drafted in 1965.

One clear and unequivocal step to demonstrate India's opposition to all sorts of discrimination would be to adopt and champion the Draft Principles at the U.N. Human Rights Council and be willing to use them as a “mirror” to see whether “our domestic policies, laws and implementing mechanisms measure up to the global human rights standards that we ourselves have striven to develop,” Mr. Diwakar said.

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