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## India rejects bid to include caste in U.N. norms for racial bias

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India has rejected appeals by civil society activists and Parliamentarians not to oppose the inclusion of caste in a new set of standards on equality and non-discrimination being considered by a United Nations organisation.

“Inclusion of caste in the definition of racial discrimination is completely unacceptable. We reject the notion that caste falls under the rubric of racial discrimination,” said a senior official. India’s stand would dishearten activists campaigning for inclusion of caste in the “2009 Draft principles and Guidelines for the Effective Elimination of Discrimination based on Work and Descent” when the U.N. Human Rights Council reconvenes in June. In the last session, the issue did not even make it to the agenda due to behind the scenes activity by Indian diplomats.

Officials admit social activist Paul Diwakar’s contention that it was an Indian 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 (CERD) when it was first being drafted in the mid-sixties. But they say Mr. Paul’s argument that India should now again take the lead in including caste based discrimination is misplaced.

“Descent was used by an Indian delegate in 1965 in a completely different context. It referred to nationality of origin or the nationality of parents. It was not at all the intention to include caste in the definition. It would be legally, politically and historically incorrect to do that,” contend officials.

“Besides how can anyone seriously suggest that India’s fight against caste based discrimination will be helped by international attention on the issue? Are we a closed country where debates do not take place and correctives not applied?” they asked.

The officials appreciated the stand taken by Parliamentarian Praveen Rashtupal in a letter to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in which he said, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes was inadequate in addressing caste based discrimination as it lacked resources, staff and teeth. However, they pointed to a scenario where a delegate from a foreign country berated India for caste based crimes if the U.N. body adopted caste as one of the elements of racial discrimination. “It will just muddy the waters instead of helping us remove this evil. Imagine the reaction when U.N. bodies begin accusing India of being intolerant to the weaker castes. Progressive people who are working to end this will become sidelined if there is uproar against foreign advice,” added the officials.

As for the claim by civil society activists that the government’s opposition reflected a lack of awareness of the trajectory of the global human rights movement, officials claim the issue was reopened in 2006 to address newer forms of discrimination that had come up. These include racial profiling, Islamophobia etc. While the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is keen to include these issues, Europe is not ready to do so. “Our task right now is to find ways to address these opposing viewpoints. While we sympathise with the OIC and the African nations, we must avoid confrontation on the issue,” they observed while wondering why some European nations were keen on pushing for inclusion of caste when other new types of discrimination must be addressed.

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