

## WHY NOT A SEPARATE UN CHARTER AGAINST CASTEISM?

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The attempt of Indian Dalit groups to persuade the UN to include untouchability and casteism in the category of racism or racism-related discrimination has generated a lively debate<sup>1</sup>. The Government of India has opposed it because it goes against the ('we may be poor but we have a noble civilisation') image that it has been determinedly cultivating in international forums for the last fifty years. It does not say so, of course. It says instead that 'internationalising' the issue is unnecessary, for two rather spurious reasons. One is that India has Constitutionally prohibited casteism and caste discrimination and has enacted legislation to punish untouchability in whatever form it manifests itself. That is to say, when there are internal mechanisms for tackling the problem, why should it be internationalised? By the same token the UN need not be concerned about extra-judicial executions and custodial violence since there is no country which has not prohibited such atrocities in law. International human rights concern has nonetheless expressed itself in these matters since the national laws are systematically violated.

The other argument is that, treating casteism as a form of racism or racism-related discrimination will confuse and dilute the struggle against racism. By implication, the struggle against racism is some how a very noble thing which should not be sullied by dragging in untouchability and all that. Perhaps untouchability is a mere social problem whereas racism is a crime against humanity, and conflating the two will reduce the seriousness of the latter. Here, too, it is official India's discomfort more than any thing else that is the prompting factor. It is not the fight against racism but India's image as a

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<sup>1</sup> This was at the 'World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance' held under UN auspices at Durban, South Africa during August-September 2001

fighter against racism that is likely to get 'confused', once untouchability is talked about in international forums.

On the other hand I would argue that treating casteism and untouchability as a form of racism would have the effect of obscuring the specificity of caste and casteism, and even otherwise there is no reason why caste discrimination, untouchability in particular, should not be treated in its own right as a crime against humanity instead of assimilating it to racism. After all the UN is committed to opposing all forms of systematic discrimination and not merely those which resemble racism. Racism has occupied an important place in the UN's agenda because the origins of that organisation are traceable in part to the upsurge of popular revulsion for Nazism, and in later years that world body has spearheaded international condemnation of racism in Southern Africa. These very legitimate reasons should not obscure the fact that racism is not alone at the nadir of discrimination. Casteism, as an issue that concerns one sixth of the world's population and is an important ingredient of the social life of the second largest country in the world, should rightfully demand a place for itself in the UN's agenda, rather than as an Indian variant of a generic thing called racism.

Perhaps the Dalit groups which are campaigning/lobbying for inclusion of casteism in the broad category of racism are motivated by three concerns. One is the practical consideration that the UN has already developed various norms and mechanisms to deal with racism, and the struggle against casteism can depend upon those structures if casteism is accepted as a form of racism. The second is the understandable desire to see India's Hindu establishment condemned in the same breath as the practitioners of apartheid. And the third is probably a certain theoretical understanding, namely that casteism has its origin in the Arya-Dasa or Arya-Dravida divide, which in turn is a racist divide. This theory was very popular with the Tamil non-Brahmin movement, but there are not many social scientists/historians who would accept this theory of the origin of Varna<sup>2</sup> society. In fact the issue of the origins of Varna society remains

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<sup>2</sup> Refers to the division of Hindu society into four social classes

an open question, unlike the question of the injury and injustice it has done to the toiling people, on which there can be no two opinions outside the most rabidly Brahminical circles.

But there is no reason why India should not be called to account for casteism as a separate crime not assimilated to racism. There are at least two reasons for wanting to maintain the distinction. One is that racism has never been declared to be divinely ordained whereas caste is declared to have been created by God himself. The second is that even though race like caste carries with it notions of unequal worth, caste goes beyond that and sets up a hierarchy of modes of life including occupations centred on the notion of unequal inherent worth, unequal rights and unequal value. Hindu society must be called to account for the entirety of its crime and not just that part of it which is comparable to racism.

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