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UN's caste declaration riles India

By Neeta Lal

DELHI - The United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) recent decision to declare discrimination based on the caste system a "human-rights abuse" - thereby acknowledging centuries of bias against the world's estimated 200 million Dalits (untouchables) - has evoked a sharp reaction from India.

The UN decision came about despite robust opposition from the Indian government and its aggressive lobbying to get the council to delete the word "caste" from its draft. Instead, the UNHRC is now set to ratify draft principles that recognize persecution of Dalits worldwide.

No other country has opposed the move as vehemently as India. This is because the UNHRC declaration has a special relevance

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to India and its 65 million Dalits - the largest for any single [country](#).

This sizeable demographic is considered "unclean" [in India](#) by the upper castes who regard their presence, and sometimes even their shadow, as polluting. It is in this regard that the UN draft pledges to work for the "effective elimination of [discrimination](#) based on work and descent".

What most weakened India's case in the UNHRC was Nepal's acquiescence to the move. Wrestling the opportunity, the council has now called on India to follow Nepal's example even as New Delhi feels this amounts to "[international](#) interference" in a sensitive internal matter.

There's no denying that [the issue](#) of Dalits - who occupy the



lowest rung of India's well-entrenched caste pyramid - is a virtual tinderbox in the country. Despite India's increasing literacy levels, mounting economic wealth and growing geopolitical heft, the benefits of national prosperity haven't quite percolated down to low-caste Indians, who are ostracized by mainstream society.

Despite over six decades of independence from British rule, Dalits are still discriminated against in all aspect of life in India despite laws specifically outlawing such acts. They are the victims of economic embargos, denied basic human rights such as access to [clean drinking water](#), use of public facilities, education and access to places of worship.

Even constitutional laws, modeled on those framed by [the Confederate states](#) in America during the reconstruction period after [the Civil War](#) to protect freed black American slaves, have never been enforced by the Indian judiciary and legislature, which are dominated by high castes.

This is indeed ironic as one of this century's most recognizable global icons - Mahatma Gandhi - was an Indian who crusaded tirelessly against discrimination based on caste or gender. He ensured that the founding fathers of the Indian constitution made special provisions to grant India's Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Castes special privileges like reservations (up to 33%) in jobs and educational institutes.

So why is there such a hue and cry in India over the UNHRC move? According to experts, the brouhaha has as much to do with politics as with economics and human rights. First, it is not in favor of vested political interests to eliminate the caste system in India as Dalits form a lucrative vote bank. In fact, in a country of a billion-plus population, it would be foolhardy to fritter away this attractive political constituency that dominates large swaths of India.

The prime example is India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh (population: 190 million) which has 403 electoral constituencies. Though there are no official figures available, it is estimated that the country's largest number of Dalits - probably half - reside here. The results are clear; currently the state is ruled by the powerful Dalit-dominated Bahujan Samaj Party, helmed by its redoubtable chief minister Mayawati, who was ranked by Forbes magazine in 2008 at 59 on its world's most powerful women list.

In 1995, at age 39, Mayawati was the youngest politician elected to the post of chief minister and was also the first Dalit to head a state government. She may well trail-blaze again as India's first Dalit prime minister as she goes about building an alliance with India's Brahmins, augmenting the Dalits' pan-India footprint. (In June, Meira Kumar was elected the first Dalit woman ever as parliament speaker.)

Still, there's no denying that Mayawati is more an aberration rather than the rule in India. So will the UNHRC move help get Indian Dalits' global attention followed by aid from bodies like the European Union? Dr Udit Raj of the Dalit-based Indian Justice Party has welcomed the UN move and feels it will focus the international spotlight on the issue provided the "Indian government has the courage to accept there's discrimination".

It is unlikely that a single UN resolution will radically change the landscape of social realities in India. Perhaps even the UNHRC is aware of this fact. Can its declaration be a tool to harass India then? Is it a clever ploy to keep the ambitious country on a leash in view of its abysmal human-rights record? The idea could be to push India to be answerable for discrimination based on work, descent and gender.

Some good has already come out of the UNHRC exercise, albeit indirectly. Rahul Gandhi, the architect of the ruling Congress

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Party's general election victory in May, has launched a recent drive to uplift Dalits. He is visiting Dalit homes across Uttar Pradesh and has ordered his party members to recalibrate their welfare programs in favor of Dalits. However, many see the Gandhi scion's move as a larger political game plan to erode Mayawati's base in Uttar Pradesh.

In other words, the UNHRC declaration is a sword that will cut both ways for India. While it will definitely focus international attention on the issue - and hopefully lead to increased government spending to improve opportunities for Dalits in the country - it has simultaneously underscored the country's feudalistic and discriminatory ethos. It is this that India is most sensitive about as it tries to wrest center stage in the new global regime.

Neeta Lal is a widely published writer/commentator who contributes to many reputed national and international print and Internet publications.

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Head Office: Unit B, 16/F, Li Dong Building, No. 9 Li Yuen Street East, Central, Hong Kong

Thailand Bureau: 11/13 Petchkasem Road, Hua Hin, Prachuab Kirikhan, Thailand 77110