

## **The EU must address caste discrimination in dialogues with India**

*The development of a society is measured not only in economic terms. The degree of civilization can be measured by how the weakest in society are treated. In this regard, the development of the world's largest democracy has more or less been standing still.*

**By Alf Svensson, MEP**

**Recently I read about a woman in India who worked** emptying the latrines for some families in Madhya Pradesh. Her work was done by hand and at dawn, the time when no one in the village would have to see her. The woman belongs to the Dalits, a large group of people who have had the misfortune to be born into the lowest parts of the caste system.



Here in the European Parliament a report on so-called caste-based discrimination was presented recently. The caste system's way of classifying people discriminates against 260 million people worldwide, most of which are found in India. Through this system, a quarter of a billion people have been deprived of their human dignity! The discrimination is particularly reflected in caste-based violence and the denial of rights and, as is often the case, women and children are the most seriously affected. The jobs reserved for them are the most dangerous and dirtiest. The report says that the Dalits are subjected to forced labour and forced prostitution, they are consistently discriminated against, socially and economically, by the higher castes. Since they are excluded in terms of access to land, employment, health, education, water and sanitation, they are to a greater extent forced into poverty. The weakest in Indian society are known as the "untouchables". They are systematically discriminated against and oppressed in Indian society in a way that can be likened to apartheid.

The caste system is religiously sanctioned, it is a part of Hinduism and its way of assessing human dignity. The religious dimension perhaps makes a change away from the caste system more difficult, but nevertheless necessary!

### **Human dignity is universal**

Human dignity is universal and independent of cultural and religious circumstances. It does not matter if a religion refuses to recognize people's unique and inviolable value - the value is still there! There is no room for moral relativism or a supposed tolerance of other cultures. The Indian Constitution provides citizens with equal rights, and discrimination based on caste is formally illegal. On paper it looks good, but the problems remain in Indian society.

India is a great country that has made an impressive journey. The country is the size of two-thirds of Europe's surface, with 1.2 billion inhabitants. The economy has every year since 1990 grown by about 6%. The result of the opening of the borders to trade

and the establishment of a market economy is that millions of people have been raised out of poverty. For a long time the EU has had good diplomatic and political relations and good trade relationships with India. This is good and we should trade more with each other: but not at any price or based on whatever principles.

The Indian authorities must now begin to live up to its commitments on non-discrimination and to ensure that the law on registered castes is being observed. EU must clearly address the issue of discrimination on grounds of caste in its dialogues with India and prioritize programs that work against discrimination, including the area of education. Laws that hinder development projects and the ability to channel financial assistance to voluntary organizations working with disadvantaged lower castes, must be removed.

The development of a society is measured not only in economic terms. The degree of civilization can be measured by how the weakest in society are treated. On this point, the development of the world's largest democracy, have more or less been standing still. Future EU-cooperation with India must prioritize efforts against discrimination based on caste.

*Alf Svensson is a Member of the European Parliament and a former Swedish Minister for Development Cooperation. The [original Swedish language version of this article](#) was published on the Newsmill website in March 2013.*