

Lots of sympathy, too little action

The EU could – and should – do more to address caste discrimination, one of the world’s most serious human rights problems, argue three leading European campaigners for Dalit rights.

By Meena Varma, Gerard Oonk and Rikke Nöhrind

This coming Monday, campaigners for Dalit rights will speak at a hearing in the European Parliament. They will tell the audience how hundreds of millions of human beings, in South Asia and elsewhere, are being subjected to gross human rights violations from the day they are born – all because of the entrenched caste system, which has existed for thousands of years, but ought to have no place in the contemporary world. They will also argue that the European Union should do more to address the issue.

The fact that this hearing - on caste-based discrimination in South Asia - is taking place is good news in itself. Hosted by the Parliament’s Sub-Committee on Human Rights (DROI) and three other committees and delegations, the event will give parliamentarians as well as the public an important opportunity to learn more about a human rights problem that affects an estimated 260 million people worldwide, but is too often overlooked by Western decision makers and media outlets. It may also serve as an indication of possible future steps by the European Parliament to address caste discrimination.

Nevertheless, there is a need for much firmer EU action in this area. For those who have followed the fate of the Dalit issue in the corridors of EU institutions, including the European Parliament, over the years, the hearing may even provoke a sense of déjà vu.

Similar hearings have taken place before, and four years ago this month the European Parliament passed a resolution on the human rights situation of the Dalits in India, noting with concern “the lack of substantive EU engagement with the Indian Government on the vast problem of caste-based discrimination.” Very little has been done by the EU system since then to implement the recommendations made in this admirable resolution.

One of the speakers at Monday’s event, human rights campaigner Manjula Pradeep, is a tireless voice for the rights of India’s downtrodden Dalits – formerly known as ‘untouchables’. She does important work to defend the rights of Dalit women and children and, time and again, provides documentation on the atrocities that are committed against Dalits on a daily basis.

When Ms Pradeep speaks – often with emotion, always with dignity and backed up by a vast amount of knowledge of the issue - people listen. Politicians, government officials, journalists, activists and ordinary people nod sympathetically and agree that something ought to be done. Sadly, their sympathy is all too rarely transformed into concrete action.

There are, however, positive signs that this may be changing. The UN system has increasingly addressed caste discrimination in recent years. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, led by example in 2009 when she called on the international community to “tear down the wall of caste”. This January, many governments raised the issue of caste discrimination during a UN review of Nepal’s human rights record.

A number of individual countries in the EU and elsewhere appear willing to take the issue forward. This would include addressing it in the UN Human Rights Council and in discussions with caste-affected countries, not least India, whose government stubbornly and incomprehensibly refuses to recognise caste discrimination as an international human rights issue. The country's increasing political and economic muscle might scare off the not-so-brave, but a truly united EU should not bow to such pressure.

However, a coordinated EU policy on caste discrimination is blatantly lacking. Yes, various EU institutions, to their credit, do address the problem in bits and pieces – e.g. by funding some projects - but this is hardly sufficient. An overall policy would recognise caste discrimination as an important international human rights and development issue. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) has produced a set of recommendations on such a policy – it includes a call to the newly formed European External Action Service (EEAS) to integrate concern for caste discrimination into policies and programmes.

This parliamentary hearing is a fine and most welcome event, but it must be followed up by concrete action. What is really needed is a comprehensive EU policy on one of the most serious and enduring human rights outrages in the world. It is time for the EU to act, not just to listen.

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