

The Dalits: Demand for attitude change

Written by the Minister of International Development Heikki Holmås (SV)

I strongly take a stand against discrimination. The UN Human Rights Declaration and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination are clear. Discrimination is prohibited. Discrimination on the grounds of caste is just as bad as gender, ethnicity or religion.



Minister of International Development Heikki Holmås (SV).

Foto: Utviklingsdepartementet

The current Norwegian Government is concerned with the improvement of the dalit situation in Southeast Asia. Norway has a large collaboration with India with regards to health. The goal is to reduce mother and child mortality in five of the Indian states. This is an important measure in improving the situation for both the dalits- and the poor segment of the population in general.

Political leaders in India and Nepal have for a long time been engaged with the dalit situation. The Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, gender or caste. Other laws are also in place to fight discrimination, such as those within the educational- and public sector. India has also had important dalit politicians, both a President and a newly departed Prime Minister in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh with its 200 million inhabitants. Nepal has also established legislation and other measures in order to strengthen the rights of this particular group.

The ill-treatment of many dalits is thus not planned discrimination on behalf of the State. The cause can be found in ancient attitudes, tradition, and culture in Southeast Asia. These attitudes are also unfortunately found within the authority apparatus, the judiciary and the police. The authorities in India and Nepal must therefore take responsibility to change these outlooks.

The political work done in supporting the dalits is important. A broad popular engagement is a necessary addition to the efforts of the public authorities. We also witness today that the dalits are mobilising politically in parties and interest groups. They take use of the possibilities that the open and democratic tradition in India offers. This is a very positive development. I myself have participated in several arrangements, which highlighted the demands of the dalits at the World Social Forum in Mumbai in 2004.

The challenges that the dalits face are of course also closely tied up with the question regarding distribution. India still has widespread poverty despite its strong economic growth.

It is positive in this regard that the Indian authorities have a range of measures that will assure work, income and food for the countries poor including the dalit population. Economic growth must be combined with good social distribution in order to be felt as *real* development for all.

Notwithstanding the fact that much has been done in order to improve the dalits position in society, there is a demand for profound changes in attitude in both India and Nepal. This is why international attention is important. It is encouraging that this years Operation Day`s Work (Operasjons Dagsverk) will support the case of the dalits. The Government will continue its work with improving the living conditions of this particular group. This will be done through our projects in India, through the UN and our work with human rights.

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