

Indian NGOs raise Dalit issues before UN panel

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On the third day after the commencement of the 37th Session of the United Nations Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), a 14-member Non-Government delegation from India organized a seminar to flag issues of importance.

This crucial seminar was held a day before the Indian government presented its responses to the CEDAW committee. The delegation also expressed its dissatisfaction over the replies given by the Indian government to the CEDAW committee. Led by Ruth Manorama, president, NAWO, the NGO delegation members touched upon a range of issues which included violence against Dalit women, displacement of tribal populations and trafficking of tribal and Dalit women, distress migration of landless agricultural labourers, the need for law reform and concerns of implementation, the plight of women caught in armed conflict in the north-east and the resultant displacement as well as violence against women from minority communities, the flawed understanding of women's empowerment as evinced in government schemes of micro-credit as well as the inertia of the government to bring about qualitative changes in the educational system.

While urging the CEDAW committee members to consider some of their recommendations in the light of the government's presentation on January 18, the NGO delegation members highlighted those aspects which they said had been "obfuscated" in the government's responses to the CEDAW committee's queries.

The first speaker, Kalpana Kannabiran, a professor of law and a civil rights activist spoke about the violence that was experienced by women in seemingly "normal times". She said that the second and third reports of the government to the CEDAW committee did not at all address the question of caste discrimination on ground. Other speakers and members of the delegation like Cynthia Stephen from the National Centre for Dalit Rights, Bangalore spoke of the "politics" of witch-hunting and the absence of any government intervention and policies.

While Pramila Swain from FARR, an NGO in Orissa, spoke about the specific problems of displacement of tribals in the context of development projects, Sreekala MG from the North-East Network of Women spoke on how women were caught in the cross-fire of armed conflict in the North-East of India. In this context, Ruth Manorama read out a letter written by Irom Sharmila who is currently on a protest fast since 2000 demanding the repeal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act.

Ruth Manorama, who mainly spoke on the pitiable status of Dalit women, quoted the recent incident at Khairlanji village in Nagpur district, Maharashtra where Dalit women from a single family were raped and murdered by an organized mob. She said that government statistics themselves showed a very low rate of conviction of crimes against Dalits. Ruth Manorama said: "The government says they will meet this challenge but the question is how they will do it. The lack of implementation of the law is reflective of the casteist mindset of the government of India."

Another speaker Madhu Mehra from the Partners for Law in Development, urged the CEDAW committee members not to accept tokenistic legislative measures but to push for content in law that fulfilled substantive equality ideals. She stressed the importance for a comprehensive law on

sexual assault that covered marital rape, child sex abuse and decriminalized same-sex intercourse. The Communal Violence (Prevention, Control and Rehabilitation of Victims) Bill, 2005, she said, was directed not so much at preventing and redressing communal violence but appeared to protect acts of commission by state governments.

Malini Ghose, founder of Nirantar, an organization working on gender issues and the right to education, felt that the government had a lot to do by way of its Constitutional obligations towards the marginalized sections. She pointed out the high drop out rates all the way up to higher education and said that basic access to education still remained elusive for tribals, Dalits and minority women.

Quoting the recent government appointed Justice Rajinder Sachar committee's findings on the socio-economic status of minorities in India, she said that the notion that cultural factors were behind the poor education of Muslim girls had been debunked. The government needed to be more proactive in also removing stereotypes in textbooks, she said while acknowledging that some steps had been initiated in this direction. Stressing the importance of eradicating illiteracy.

Ghose also pointed out that the government had not answered the CEDAW committee's queries on "tracking literacy" as well as revival of the continuing education programme. She said that the present allocation for adult literacy was as low as 0.2 per cent of the entire education budget.

The issue of the victims of the Gujarat carnage featured yet again as Sheba George, from Saharwaru, an organization based in the state, spoke on the continued violation of the rights of the minorities. She said there was no gender disaggregated data on Gujarat and the central government needed to take more interest in the conditions of those affected in the 2002 carnage as the aftermaths were still being experienced.

Source:Indiapost

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