

M. DIVAJ

**Dalits in South Asia
Inclusive policies and projects**

Madame Chair of the UN Minority Forum and Madame Independent Expert on Minorities, I am not able to thank you as per the protocol due to reduction in our time!!

Yesterday and today, when I heard experiences of several co-campaigners, struggling against odds, coming from several parts of the globe, narrating practices of discrimination, exclusion and violence, they seem very familiar to the experiences that me, my family and my people have lived through. There is one more thing that is common among us. We are all striving to reject the identities that society and culture have given us and branded us as 'natives' or 'aborigines' who need to be civilized; as migrants with no rights; as 'domestic workers' and 'bonded labourers' who are enslaved; as 'illegal occupants' whose homes are demolished; or as 'manual scavengers' who are forced to clean shit; or as 'polluted people' - as 'untouchables'.

However, we also know, deep down in our hearts that this is not true. The reason we are here is that we all know very clearly that these identities are 'forced' identities not only to demean us and to demonise but also to devalue our descent, our colour, our skills, our faith and our resources. In most places they create enmity and hatred against us. We also know why this is being done - to underpay us, to grab our land and to pillage our resources.

I am not going into Who are Dalits and their_ current forms exclusion due to paucity of time and also it has been expressed by other colleagues from Asia:

Our mentor and one who inspired many around the world is Dr. B. R. Ambedkar who led many in this process of rejecting these forced identities and in renaming ourselves and reclaiming our rights and resources in order to reclaim the human identity that has been ripped away from us. He too made a journey - from being an 'untouchable' to a freedom fighter, not just from colonial domination but also from the stranglehold of the cultural hegemony of 'caste hierarchy'. Dr. Ambedkar acknowledged the criticality of economic inclusion as key to addressing the issues of Dalits.

I will now go to the recommendations:

STATE

I. Building enabling environments

If States are to build enabling environments for us, they must first publicly recognize the several problems we continue to face due to discrimination. This is the crucial first step. States and State actors can make visible this commitment through stricter implementation of existing anti-discrimination laws

and positive action on rising cases of atrocities against us and the barriers we face in our daily economic and social life. This can only be achieved through sensitising offices of power and authority infusing in them the strong will to make proactive and progressive decisions on behalf of Dalits and along with ensuring bringing about awareness on our rights as decision makers.

II. Political Will

The economic growth of the minorities is seen as an aggression or assertion by the dominant in the societies. It has been observed in Gujarat, India there was a pogrom against Muslim minority, which crippled their business and economy. Similar trends have been observed in Orissa against Dalits and Tribal communities who belonged to Christian minority. Safety of the minorities and Dalits and Indegenous need to be ensured if at all economic inclusion is to be fostered.

Political will in ensuring rights of minorities should be achieved through enhancing legal standards and legislative mechanisms to prevent violence. In the current situation in markets which tend to further exacerbate the structural discrimination in society, States must bring in an Equal Opportunities Act to protect our rights and introduce affirmative/reservation policies in the growing private sector.

Productive resources for dalit and 'minority community must be distributed whereby States should reserve land resources for Dalits / Adivasis. State measures on distribution of land and other productive resources among poor minority households must be implemented as a measure of inclusion.

III. Budget allocations and real time expenditures.

I would like to bring out a land mark best practice brought in by the Government of India as the Scheduled Caste Sub Plan which is a good example of innovative budget allocations in favour of Dalits. This policy recognizes the need for exclusive budgetary allocation for a minority community and quantifies the proportion of allocation from the overall plan budget of the state in proportion to the percentage of population of this community to the rest of general population in the country. For example as dalit population is 16.4% of the total population, 16.4% of total plan budget in the Union (federal) budget of India is allocated for specific development of Dalits. These allocations are tied

towards schemes and programmes which directly benefit Dalits economically and socially.

Even though there are challenges in its thirty years of implementation on the ground I feel such a practice needs to be studied and adopted as a common model for all minorities in the UN system.

IV. Inclusive measures in cutting edge economic growth.

Without a share in the 'cutting edge' economic growth, it is difficult to ensure inclusion in the economic sphere. I am just taking a small example in the emerging energy sector in India as a case in point.

Energy security has become a cutting edge concern in all nations pursuing economic growth. Ensuring energy and its protection through conventional systems have been so far denied to people living in rural and remote areas. There has been a stress on electricity being generated through conventional systems like hydel, coal, oil or gas, to ensure energy security to unconnected villages and power denied citizens in the rural areas, remote areas, tribal areas and segregated villages of scheduled castes. We say, it is not the quantum of power generation that matters more than the problem of distribution of power to all.

Instead Dalits and other minorities should be introduced into energy protection and distribution in all the non conventional energy production namely solar, bio gas, and wind mills. All the production through non conventional methods should be small scale production and designed such that we can participate and use the same.

It is known that markets have continued to practice policies of economic exclusion. Though there has been a thrust on urbanization, little has been done to ensure protection and safeguards for those among our brothers and sisters, shifting from rural to urban work. Stringent focus needs to be given in balancing out the interests of the market vis a vis the basic needs. Urban planning remains concentrated on spatial planning, planning of goods and services and infrastructure for further growth seldom incorporating within its purview the needs of urban poor. Identity documentation has become a night mare for most minorities and dalits that it is become impossible to access any development schemes. Effective mechanisms need to be found to ensure that every resident in the city is able to be part of urban participation and local governance programmes irrespective of our migrant status.

Thus the enabling environment can only emerge for us when there is greater will power and political will to transform our mindsets before and above institutions and practices.

