Labour MPs' Move against 'atrocities' on Dalits

By Hasan Suroor


A week before the Indian Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani, arrives here, 13 prominent British Labour Party MPs have submitted a parliamentary motion condemning the “continued atrocities against Dalits” in India, and calling for “re-evaluation” of aid and development programmes with New Delhi.

The motion raises questions on the way the earthquake aid was distribute in Gujarat and says that all development agreements with India should be reviewed on the “basis of their effect on Dalit communities”. Seeking to put caste-based discrimination on the same footing as racism, it “strongly” recommends that India implement the measures suggested by the U.N. Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

The motion also calls upon the Home Office to “monitor the activities of the right-wing Hindutva organisations operating in the U.K. to ensure that they are not promoting caste and descent-based discrimination and the practice of untouchability.”

Jeremy Corbyn, a leading Left-wing Labour MP who signed the motion, told The Hindu that it was aimed at highlighting the need to provide “constitutional and legal protection” to Dalits. The problem was not that there were no laws but it was about their implementation.

Mr. Corbyn, who is associated with the campaign group Dalit Solidarity Network, sought to avoid the impression that it was an anti-India move and said that, in fact, the Indian officials with whom he had discussed the issue had been “very positive”. But he emphasised that caste-based discrimination was a matter of growing concern and should be treated with the same urgency as the fight against racism.

The other signatories include Tony Banks, Ann Cryer, John McDonnell, Bob Spink, Martin Caton, Lynne Jones, Martin Smyth, John Randall, Simon Thames, David Drew, Andrew Stunnell and Kelvin Hopkins.

The motion, which follows Amnesty International’s recent criticism of human rights “abuses” in India, was described by a senior Asian labour activist as smacking of “interference in India’s internal problems”. “Even the Labour Party of which Mr. Corbyn is a prominent member has got plenty of racism going on within itself”,
said Paramjit Bahia, adding, however, that the caste discrimination did exist and by not addressing the problem India had left itself open to attacks from outside.

Civil rights campaigners welcomed the motion saying it should not be seen as an anti-India propaganda. "We fully support it. It is a live issue and should be highlighted," a spokesperson for South Asia Solidarity Group said. She hoped the British government would raise it with Mr. Advani.