I&B Advisory on the Term 'Dalit'

Why in news?

\n\n

Union Information and Broadcasting Ministry's advisory has asked the media to avoid using the term ‘Dalit’.

\n\n

What is the rationale?

\n\n

\n
- The advisory comes in compliance with orders of the Bombay and Madhya Pradesh High Courts.
\n
- The courts directed the Centre and state governments to refrain from using the term 'dalit'.
\n
- This is because the term found no mention in the Constitution of India or any statute.
\n
- Earlier, the Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry issued a directive to use only the term ‘Scheduled Castes’ in all official matters.
\n
- So the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court directed the I&B Ministry to consider making a similar directive to the media.
\n
- The court did not actually go into the merits of using the term.
\n

\n\n

What is the National Commission for SC's view?

\n\n

\n
- A decade ago, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes disfavoured the use of 'Dalit'.
\n

- The commission felt it was unconstitutional.
  \n
- This is because belonging to a ‘Scheduled Caste’ is a legal status.
  \n
- It is conferred on members of castes named in a list notified by the President under Article 341.
  \n
- Therefore, ‘Scheduled Caste’ is the appropriate way to refer to this class of people.
  \n

\n\n

Why is the term 'dalit' significant?

\n\n

\n
- The term has evolved over a period of time and has come to symbolise different things in different contexts.
  \n
- In the past, Dalits were referred to as ‘untouchables’.
  \n
- But the official term during British rule was ‘depressed classes’.
  \n
- Mahatma Gandhi sought to remove the stigma of ‘pollution’.
  \n
- He thus used the term ‘Harijans’, or ‘children of god’.
  \n
- In the course of time, the community rejected this appellation as patronising.
  \n
- It was only some decades ago that they began to refer to themselves as Dalits.
  \n
- ‘Dalit’ literally means ‘downtrodden’ or ‘broken’.
  \n
- But it is a word loaded with emotions reflecting the struggle of a community to reassert its identity.
  \n
- “Dalit” is primarily an anti-caste, anti-Brahminical, anti-capitalistic, anti-oppression, anti-superstition rebellion.
  \n
- It advocates the claim to the rights that were denied to them for centuries.
  \n
- “Dalit” is an open category with a call to all those who believe in the project of annihilation of caste.
  \n

- There are literary works under the 'dalit literature' tag, which have had revolutionary impacts.
  \n

\n\n

What are the disputes?

\n\n

\n
- **Media** -The I&B Ministry’s advisory specifies as “for all official transactions, matters.”
  \n
- This is confusing as the media’s references to the community are usually beyond official contexts.
  \n
- It is unreasonable to oppose the use of the term ‘Dalit’ in the media and in non-official contexts.
  \n
- **Right** - Significantly, 'Dalit' is now a nomenclature chosen and used by the community itself.
  \n
- It must be recognised that ‘Dalit’ is an expression of self-empowerment.
  \n
- Communities should have the right to decide what they wish to call themselves.
  \n
- Thwarting this is the principal factor that goes into maintaining caste supremacy.
  \n
- So the directive would be an attempt to deny the powerful and emotive meaning of the word 'Dalit'.
  \n
- **Identity** - Some Dalits prefer staying with the constitutionally-decided terminology of 'Scheduled Caste'.
  \n
- They feel it inappropriate to be “lower” when they have reached great heights in their careers.
  \n
- These are the ones who constantly seek to escape their stigmatised identities but are unable due to their known caste status.
  \n
- So, many refrained from using the word Dalit long before.
  \n
- They preferred identities such as Ambedkarite, Ravidassi or Valmiki to

identify with an exceptional individual.
\n
- **Term** - The government should indeed proceed with a workable nomenclature such as Scheduled Caste.
\n
- However, Scheduled Caste is more a bureaucratic normalisation.
\n
- It has no capacity to change the structures of social oppression.
\n
- “Dalit”, on the other hand, evokes emotions of change and positivity.
\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

\n

