

I&B Advisory on the Term 'Dalit'

Why in news?

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

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What is the rationale?

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- The advisory comes in compliance with orders of the Bombay and Madhya Pradesh High Courts.

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- The courts directed the Centre and state governments to refrain from using the term 'dalit'.

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- This is because the term found no mention in the Constitution of India or any statute.

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- Earlier, the Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry issued a directive to use only the term 'Scheduled Castes' in all official matters.

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- So the Nagpur Bench of the Bombay High Court directed the I&B Ministry to consider making a similar directive to the media.

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- The court did not actually go into the merits of using the term.

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What is the National Commission for SC's view?

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

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

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

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What are the disputes?

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- **Media** -The I&B Ministry's advisory specifies as "for all official transactions, matters."

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- This is confusing as the media's references to the community are usually beyond official contexts.

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- It is unreasonable to oppose the use of the term 'Dalit' in the media and in non-official contexts.

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- **Right** - Significantly, 'Dalit' is now a nomenclature chosen and used by the community itself.

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- It must be recognised that 'Dalit' is an expression of self-empowerment.

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- Communities should have the right to decide what they wish to call themselves.

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- Thwarting this is the principal factor that goes into maintaining caste supremacy.

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- So the directive would be an attempt to deny the powerful and emotive meaning of the word 'Dalit'.

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- **Identity** - Some Dalits prefer staying with the constitutionally-decided terminology of 'Scheduled Caste'.

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- They feel it inappropriate to be "lower" when they have reached great heights in their careers.

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- These are the ones who constantly seek to escape their stigmatised identities but are unable due to their known caste status.

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- So, many refrained from using the word Dalit long before.

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- They preferred identities such as Ambedkarite, Ravidassi or Valmiki to

identify with an exceptional individual.

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- **Term** - The government should indeed proceed with a workable nomenclature such as Scheduled Caste.

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- However, Scheduled Caste is more a bureaucratic normalisation.

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- It has no capacity to change the structures of social oppression.

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- “Dalit”, on the other hand, evokes emotions of change and positivity.

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Source: The Hindu, Indian Express

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