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India's 'untouchables' ask Obama for a visit

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NEW DELHI -- Comparing their struggle with America's civil rights movement, India's low-caste Dalits are urging President Obama to take note of their suffering during his state visit next week.

Obama's three-day visit beginning Nov. 6 is meant to deepen economic ties with India, but Dalit activists say he "symbolizes the hope of freedom for oppressed people across the world."

"As Obama emerged out of the historic struggles of the blacks in the U.S., his visit could also inspire the movement for the abolition of caste, the Indian variety of slavery," said Kancha Ilaiah, a political scientist and Dalit activist, in an open letter to Obama.

More than 166 million of India's 1.1 billion people are Dalits, once known as "untouchables" in India's rigid caste system. Although the constitution bans discrimination and provides for affirmative action, Dalits remain on the lowest rung of the economic and social ladder.

Obama's victory in the 2008 presidential elections was hailed by Dalits as a sign of hope for the downtrodden. They called him an "American Dalit."

Obama has also faced pressure from Sikh groups to visit the famed Golden Temple; the White House has denied reports that Obama won't visit the shrine because the required head covering might fan false rumors that he is a Muslim.

While Obama is scheduled to visit a memorial to independence leader Mahatma Gandhi, Ilaiah asked Obama to pay homage also to the icon of Dalit rights, Bhimrao Ambedkar, a Buddhist who chaired the drafting for India's constitution after winning independence in 1947.

Another open letter, by Dalit activist John Dayal, made the same request, calling Ambedkar "India's Abraham Lincoln." Dalit activist Atul Krishna Biswas invoked the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech.

The Denmark-based International Dalit Solidarity Movement asked Obama to urge the Indian government "to take all available measures, supported by effective means for their implementation, to end caste discrimination."

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