UNHRC

United Nations Human Rights Council

Study Guide

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Letter from Secretary General

Dear Delegates,

It is with immense pride and great anticipation that I welcome you to JBCNMUN 2026.

As you prepare to enter your respective committees, remember that you are not merely walking into another conference—you are stepping into a forum where ideas will be challenged, alliances will be forged, and the course of history, however simulated, will be shaped by your decisions. Every speech you deliver, every motion you raise, every resolution you draft, and every negotiation you undertake has the potential to redefine the direction of your committee.

Model United Nations is far more than a competition of eloquence. It is a rigorous test of diplomacy, intellect, composure, and leadership. It demands that delegates think beyond personal opinion, embrace the complexities of international relations, and defend the interests of their assigned nations with conviction and integrity. The finest delegates are not those who speak the loudest, but those who inspire consensus, command respect, and transform disagreement into meaningful progress.

The agenda before you is neither simple nor forgiving. It mirrors the uncertainty, tension, and complexity of the world we inhabit today. There will be moments where compromise appears impossible, where the pressure of crisis will test your resolve, and where every decision will carry profound consequences. In those moments, I encourage you to rise above hesitation. Challenge convention. Defend your principles. Negotiate with purpose. Lead with vision.

Letter from Secretary General

This Study Guide has been meticulously prepared to equip you with the knowledge and context necessary to begin your research. It is not intended to provide answers, but to provoke questions. Let it serve as the foundation upon which you build your understanding, refine your arguments, and develop innovative solutions. The quality of your preparation will ultimately determine the quality of your diplomacy.

JBCNMUN 2026 has been built on a commitment to excellence. Every member of the Secretariat, Executive Board, and Organising Committee has dedicated countless hours to creating an experience that is intellectually demanding, professionally enriching, and truly memorable. It is now your turn to uphold that standard. Approach every session with discipline, respect, curiosity, and an unwavering commitment to meaningful debate.

When the final gavel falls, I hope you leave not only with awards or accolades, but with a deeper understanding of global affairs, lasting friendships, and the confidence to lead beyond the committee's limits room. The skills you cultivate here—critical thinking, diplomacy, negotiation, and resilience—will remain with you long after the conference concludes. The world has never been changed by those who remained silent. It has always belonged to those who possessed the courage to speak, the wisdom to listen, and the determination to act.

I wish each one of you the very best as you embark on this remarkable journey. Research diligently, debate passionately, negotiate wisely, and above all, strive to leave a legacy worthy of remembrance.

I look forward to witnessing the exceptional diplomacy that will define JBCNMUN 2026.

Warm regards,

Niaan Dand
Secretary-General
JBCNMUN 2026

Letter from Executive Board

Dear Delegates,

It is with utmost pride that we, the executive board of United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC), Samidha Sonkar, Adhiraj Bhatia and Reya Kutty, welcome you to JBCN Parel x Chembur MUN 2026. We are glad to introduce the agenda we will be deliberating: the persistence of caste-based discrimination and descent-based slavery as a form of human rights violation.

This is not a comfortable topic, and it should not be treated as one. It concerns a form of inherited, hereditary status-based exclusion that affects an estimated 250 million people worldwide – not confined to any single region, religion, or period of history, but alive today on every continent. It sits at the intersection of race, poverty, gender, and labour rights, and it forces us to ask a hard question that the Council itself has struggled to answer consistently: when discrimination is embedded in social structure rather than in explicit state policy, whose responsibility is it to dismantle it?

I expect delegates to come prepared with more than a surface-level knowledge of their country's stance. This guide is a starting point, not a substitute for independent research. You are expected to know your country's domestic legal framework or lack thereof, its voting record and statements at the Human Rights Council and in the Universal Periodic Review, and the position of any regional or political bloc it belongs to. Delegates representing states that are themselves named in this guide should be prepared to defend, contextualise and put forward their solutions to combat the issue.

Above all, we want a debate that treats affected communities as rights-holders and political actors, not as a case study to be discussed in the abstract. Good luck, and we look forward to a rigorous committee.

Introduction to the Agenda

"Deliberating upon the Persistence of Caste-Based Discrimination and Descent-Based Slavery as a Form of Human Rights Violation"

Caste-based discrimination is one of the world's most persistent and tough forms of discrimination. Its challenges stem from religious scripture to forms of it being embedded in legislation. It assigns social status without reviewing qualifications or any sort of merit.

Descent-based slavery refers to when people inherit a status of servitude or slavery due to being born into a specific family or raised in a particular community.

The agenda primarily tackles two interconnected problems for the UNHRC to combat.

1) The inheritance of social status and the following discrimination.
2) Forced labour due to descent-based slavery.

According to United Nations analysis, over 250 million people are affected by descent-based discrimination, making it one of the largest forms of discrimination worldwide

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights clearly states that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Caste and descent-based discrimination clearly contradict the statement.

- Article 1 of the UDHR states that all people are born free and equal.
- Article 2 prohibits discrimination based on status or origin.
- Article 4 prohibits slavery and servitude in all forms.
- Article 7 guarantees equal protection under the law without discrimination.

Following the legal abolition of slavery worldwide, forms of modern slavery that follow traditional practices, even involving hereditary servitude, continue to exist. This may be visible in the form of:

- Bonded labour.
- Forced domestic work.
- Agricultural servitude.
- Debt bondage passed from parents to children.

This committee must tackle how to implement global legal frameworks, boosting international cooperation, to strengthen the enforcement of laws against descent-based slavery and caste-based slavery. While protecting global peace and respecting nations' national sovereignty.

Introduction to the Committee

The Human Rights Council (also known as UNHRC) is the main intergovernmental body within the United Nations responsible for human rights. It was established in 2006 by the General Assembly, and is responsible for promoting and protecting human rights worldwide.

UNHRC has 47 member states, for a three year term, elected by the majority members of the general assembly through a direct and secret ballot. The GA also takes into account the candidate's states contributions to the promotion of human rights.

Unlike the Security Council, the UNHRC has no permanent members and no member possesses veto power.

It is headquartered at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, and typically holds three regular sessions per year, in March, June, and September, in addition to special sessions convened to address urgent human rights situations.

Introduction to Committee

Mandate & Power

UN Human Rights is mandated:

- Promote and protect all human rights for all
- Recommend that bodies of the UN system improve the promotion and protection of all human rights
- Promote and protect the right to development
- Provide technical assistance to States for human rights activities
- Coordinate UN human rights education and public information programmes
- Work actively to remove obstacles to the realization of human rights and to prevent the continuation of human rights violations
- Engage in dialogue with Governments in order to secure respect for all human rights
- Enhance international cooperation for the promotion and protection of all human rights
- Coordinate human rights promotion and protection activities throughout the United Nations system
- Rationalize, adapt, strengthen and streamline the UN human rights machinery

Unlike the UN Security Council, the Human Rights Council has no power to impose binding sanctions or authorise the use of force. Its resolutions are recommendatory rather than legally binding on states, though they carry significant moral and political weight, shape important international norms. This distinction is important for this committee. While a UNHRC resolution cannot force a country to change its domestic laws, it can recommend reforms, establish reporting mechanisms, and strengthen international support for future legal and policy changes.

Working Methods

This committee will broadly follow the working methods of the United Nations Human Rights Council. Delegates represent the official foreign policy of their assigned Member State and are expected to engage in constructive dialogue and diplomacy. While voting is permitted, the Council traditionally strives to adopt resolutions by consensus whenever possible.

Timeline

Date – 1926
Event – The Slavery Convention establishes the first international legal framework prohibiting slavery.

Date – 1945
Event – The United Nations Charter is adopted, committing Member States to promote universal respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Date – 1948
Event – The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) proclaims that all people are born free and equal in dignity and rights, without discrimination.

Date – 1950
Event – The Constitution of India abolishes untouchability under Article 17 and introduces constitutional safeguards and affirmative action for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

Date – 1956
Event – The Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery expands international prohibitions to slavery-like practices, including debt bondage and serfdom.

Date – 1965
Event – The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) is adopted, prohibiting discrimination based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin.

Date – 1981
Event – Mauritania becomes the last country in the world to formally abolish slavery by presidential decree.

Date – 1993
Event – The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action reaffirms that all human rights are universal, indivisible, interdependent, and interrelated.

Date – 1996–2002
Event – India argues before CERD that caste falls outside the scope of ICERD. In 2002, CERD adopted General Recommendation No. 29, affirming that discrimination based on descent includes caste and analogous systems.

Timeline

Date – 2000

Event – The UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights commissions a comprehensive study on discrimination based on work and descent.

Date – 2006

Event – The United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) is established by UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251, replacing the Commission on Human Rights.

Date – 2007

Event – Mauritania criminalises slavery for the first time under Act No. 2007-048.

Date – 2009

Event – The Durban Review Conference declines to explicitly reference caste discrimination in its outcome document despite advocacy from civil society organisations.

Date – 2015

Event – Mauritania strengthens its anti-slavery legislation by declaring slavery a crime against humanity and expanding legal protections for victims.

Date – 2016

Event – UN Special Rapporteur Rita Izsák-Ndiaye presents the first comprehensive UN report on caste-based discrimination to the Human Rights Council.

Date – 2018

Event – CERD issues detailed Concluding Observations to Nepal addressing caste-based discrimination, descent-based slavery, and social exclusion.

Date – 2022

Event – The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery visits Mauritania and recommends stronger victim protection, compensation, and reintegration measures.

Date – 2025

Event – UN Women publishes a policy paper on women facing discrimination based on work and descent, highlighting the intersection of caste and gender.

Date – 2025–2026

Event – The Human Rights Council renews mandates relating to racism, minority issues, and contemporary forms of slavery while Member States continue discussions on strengthening protections against descent-based discrimination.

Case Studies

India

The constituent assembly of India abolished "untouchability" while the constitution was being adopted in 1950. It abolished its practices in any form whatsoever. India later enacted the Prohibition of Civil Rights Act in 1955, and the Scheduled Castes Act, as well as the Scheduled Tribes Act in 1989. These criminalised caste-based discrimination and violence.
The government introduced affirmative action in education, healthcare, and employment for scheduled castes and scheduled tribes to address historical inequalities. Despite profound constitutional safeguards, caste-based violence and discrimination continue to be a serious concern. This historical piece shows that without effective and robust legislation, cooperation and discussion remain ineffective and dysfunctional.

Mauritania

Despite the concept of slavery being abolished in 1981. Mauritania was officially the last country to legally abolish slavery. In 2007 Mauritania criminalised slavery, and in 2015 strengthened its penalities by classifying the concept as a crime against humanity. Despite these actions, hereditary slavery continues to be an issue for the nation. Individuals remain enslaved because they are convinced they were born into servitude.This matter is especially a concern for members of the Haratine community. The largest ethnic group of Mauritania making up 40% of its population. Many are trapped in a system of poverty, and are enslaved.
International organisations, including the United Nations have repeatedly criticised Mauritania for weak enforcement. Primarily due to limited prosecutions, and inadequate victim protection programmes. This case proves how deep rooted social and cultural norms, may actually defy legislation.

Case Studies

Nepal

Nepal's 2015 Constitution recognises Dalit rights and prohibits caste-based discrimination and untouchability as serious criminal offences, reinforced by the Caste-Based Discrimination and Untouchability (Offence and Punishment) Act of 2011 (amended 2018). Dalits make up roughly 14% of Nepal's population and remain, by wide consensus including that of successive UN Special Rapporteurs, among the country's most marginalised communities, facing serious gaps in education, land ownership, political representation, and access to justice, alongside continued impunity for inter-caste-marriage-related violence. Nepal underwent its fourth-cycle Universal Periodic Review in January 2026, in which at least sixteen state recommendations explicitly addressed caste discrimination and Dalit rights, and the Special Rapporteur on minority issues published a dedicated country report in March 2026 following a visit in December 2025. Nepal is a useful case study in the gap between comparatively progressive constitutional and legislative frameworks and weak on-the-ground implementation — fewer than fifty caste-discrimination cases are typically registered with national authorities each year despite far higher documented incident rates.

Senegal, Mali, & the Wider Sahel

Beyond Mauritania, hereditary caste hierarchies exist among several ethnic groups across the Sahel, including the Wolof, Soninke, Tukulor, and Mande peoples of Senegal and Mali, where lineage-based distinctions between "noble," artisanal/occupational (griot, blacksmith, leatherworker), and formerly enslaved ("jaam") descent groups continue to shape marriage eligibility, political candidacy, and social standing, despite the absence of a legal slave status. These cases are useful for delegates seeking to demonstrate that the caste phenomenon extends well beyond South Asia and is not reducible to any single religious tradition, since these Sahelian hierarchies exist within Muslim-majority societies with entirely distinct historical roots from South Asian Hindu-linked caste systems.

Case Studies

Japan

Japan's Buraku communities, though numerically far smaller than South Asian or Sahelian caste-affected populations, remain a significant case because Japan is a wealthy, high-capacity democracy with no formal legal caste category whatsoever — demonstrating that descent-based discrimination can persist purely through informal mechanisms such as private family-registry investigations conducted before marriage or employment, long after a caste system's legal abolition. Japan's Dowa policy measures (special area-based development funding, largely wound down by the early 2000s) offer a contrasting case study in a state choosing area-based socioeconomic remedy over group-based rights recognition.

Yemen, Pakistan, & Bangladesh (Brief)

Yemen's Al-Akhdam (or Muhamasheen, “the marginalised ones”) community, believed to be of African descent, occupies the lowest social rank in Yemeni society and faces compounding discrimination alongside the country's conflict and humanitarian crisis. Pakistan and Bangladesh both host substantial Dalit and “scheduled caste” Hindu minority populations facing intersecting religious-minority and caste-based marginalisation, an important reminder that caste discrimination is not confined to Hindu-majority states and frequently compounds with religious-minority status.

Bloc Positions

South Asian Bloc (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, & Sri Lanka)

This is the most divided bloc on this issue, because it is also the most directly affected. Nepal has recently been more open to international scrutiny — allowing country visits from UN experts and engaging seriously with its 2026 review — while still pushing back on anything that feels like binding outside enforcement. India has taken the hardest line, arguing for decades that caste isn't covered under international "descent" protections (a claim the UN's own committee has rejected), and generally treats this as an internal matter best handled through its own laws and affirmative action programs. Pakistan and Bangladesh tend to tread carefully, since caste discrimination in their countries overlaps with the treatment of religious minorities — a sensitive topic for them. Expect this bloc to resist any language implying binding international monitoring, while being more open to language about technical support and capacity-building.

African Group (Mauritania, Senegal, Mali, Niger, et cetera)

Mauritania is the most exposed country in this committee. Expect it to highlight its 2025 reforms — a new special court, more anti-trafficking funding — as proof of progress, while resisting being singled out by name and facing tough questions about its treatment of anti-slavery activists. Other countries in the region with their own caste-like hierarchies (Senegal, Mali, Niger) have faced far less international attention than Mauritania and may resist broadening the conversation beyond slavery into a wider "caste" discussion that would put their own societies under scrutiny. The wider African Group tends to be protective of national sovereignty and cautious about singling out specific countries, but open to funding framed as development support rather than criticism.

Bloc Positions

Western European & Others Group (EU States, UK, US, Canada, Australia)

This bloc has generally been the strongest supporter of UN attention to caste and descent-based discrimination, often funding advocacy groups working on the issue and showing growing interest to combat the issue globally (including a 2026 European Parliament hearing on caste in South Asia). Expect this bloc to push for adopting stalled UN guidelines, stronger expert mandates, and rules addressing caste discrimination in global business supply chains. They should be prepared for pushback accusing them of focusing only on South Asia and Africa while ignoring similar discrimination within their own immigrants and diaspora communities.

Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Bloc

This bloc doesn't have a single unified stance, since only a couple of its members (Mauritania, Yemen) are directly affected. The OIC as a whole tends to prioritize other topics at the Council and will likely engage here mainly to make sure the resolution doesn't single out Muslim-majority countries or suggest any link between Islam and the justification of slavery — a point Mauritania will likely raise strongly, while also noting that Islamic scholars within its own country have rejected slavery as un-Islamic.

Bloc Positions

Latin American and Caribbean Group (GRULAC)

Caste in the South Asian or Sahelian sense isn't a major domestic issue for most of this bloc, but the region has deep experience with descent-based racial inequality tied to the legacy of transatlantic slavery. Expect this bloc to draw parallels between caste discrimination and the treatment of Afro-descendant communities, generally support strong language and reparative measures, and potentially act as an ally to the Western bloc — as long as the resolution treats descent-based discrimination as a global issue, not one confined to specific regions.

East Asian and Pacific States (including Japan)

Japan is an interesting outlier — a wealthy, high-functioning democracy that still has a documented, if under-discussed, discrimination issue involving its Buraku communities. Japan has generally preferred to address this through its own anti-discrimination laws and privacy protections (limiting access to family records used in background checks) rather than international mechanisms, and will likely resist being grouped together with South Asian or Sahelian cases. It may, however, be a useful partner on technical cooperation around data protection.

Questions a Resolution must Answer (QARMA)

- What should we call this issue? Should the resolution use "caste-based discrimination," the UN's own term ("discrimination based on work and descent"), or a broader term that also includes groups like Afro-descendant communities? The word chosen will decide which countries can claim the resolution does or doesn't apply to them.

- What law should it be built on? Should the resolution lean on existing international law (like the 2002 CERD ruling that says caste counts as descent-based discrimination), or push for a brand-new, dedicated treaty on caste and slavery? Each path has very different odds of success and different political costs.

- What new body or mechanism, if any, should be created? Should the Council finally adopt the long-stalled draft guidelines on this issue? Should it appoint a dedicated expert or working group focused only on caste and descent-based discrimination, since no such role currently exists — and how would that avoid overlapping with roles that already cover racism, minorities, and slavery?

- How do we handle countries that see this as an internal matter? India, in particular, has argued that caste is a domestic, constitutional issue — not something for international bodies to weigh in on. How does the resolution get buy-in from such countries without becoming too vague to matter?

- Is this one issue or two? Should caste-based social discrimination (as seen in South Asia and Japan) and outright slavery (as seen in Mauritania) be treated as one continuous problem needing the same solutions, or as two separate issues needing different tools — anti-discrimination policy for one, criminal prosecution and abolition enforcement for the other?

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