

# Of Converted Dalits and Reservation

*[A delegation of National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights [NCDHR] comprising Mr Paul Divakar, Mr Vincent Manoharan and Dr Umakant met Ms Asha Das, Member Secretary, National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM) and submitted a memorandum on the need to designate Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits as Scheduled Castes and extend them benefits of reservation and all other benefits by providing Constitutional Safeguards under Article 341 of the Indian Constitution on 30 June 2006. We publish below some excerpts from the Memorandum :]*

Considering the fact that out of the 24 million Christian population in this country, around 65 to 70 percent have low caste origin. The crude fact remains even today that Christianity has not adequately succeeded in dissolving the feeling of caste from among the converts to Christianity. The Caste Christians have retained all the rigour and exclusiveness of caste.

The orthodox severity and the unreason of caste exclusion have been practised to a larger extent and thereby the Christian Dalits have remained victims even within and outside the Church establishment. There is no gainsaying the fact that caste governs the life of the Christians as much as it has done for the life of the Hindus. This paradoxical situation brought no emancipation in real terms for the Christian Dalits.

The fact remains that the Christian Dalits also face division and discrimination at the hands of non-Dalits in all spheres of life. At the same time they do not have access to all privileges and benefits enjoyed by their fellow Hindu Dalits. The Constitutional Safeguards and the Special Legislations that are in place to promote and protect the human rights of the excluded and the marginalised are not being enjoyed by the Christian Dalits although they are equally excluded and discriminated.

Whereas in addition to the caste based discrimination outside in the civil society at large, there is an open and subtle forms of discrimination that are practised at all levels—in places of worship, in the admission in schools, in employment in Church-run institutions and other places, in the recruitment to religious vocations and in representation in decision-making structures within the Church establishment. Same is the case outside the Church in the larger social, economic and political set up of the country.

In truth a similar fate is met by the Muslim Dalits which actually defines their situation of exclusion and discrimination in India. Out of the 138 Million population of Muslims, the overwhelming majority have low caste background with only a small minority tracing their origin to Arab, Iranian and Central Asian settlers. An average Muslim Dalit is forced by the circumstances very much like his/her Hindu Dalit counterpart to live a life of exclusion and discrimination at the hands of Caste Muslims as well as Caste Hindus. Apart from the common features of discrimination faced by Dalits professing all kinds of faith, the Muslim Dalits are forced to live on the margins in the urban as well as the rural set up in the ghettos. The high level of illiteracy among them has forced them to live on the margin in every sense of the term. The general apathy of the policy makers towards the Muslim Dalits has been to such an extent that their rights and concerns have never been taken into consideration and that is why they have remained invisible in the development discourse, which, as a matter of fact, is also shared by Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and Christian Dalits.

The disabilities of the Scheduled Castes converted to Christianity and Islam continue even after conversion and to deny Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits the constitutional protection of reservation solely by reason of change of faith is to endanger the very concept of Secularism. The need of the hour is to correct the cultural and historical imbalances and grant equal status to Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits at par with Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits to be officially classified as Scheduled Castes.

It is only through Constitutional safeguards that their rights could be promoted and protected.

The benefits of the Reservation policy and other welfare programmes and policies should be made available to Christian Dalits and Muslim Dalits by designating them as Scheduled Castes and also by enlarging the already existing 15 percent provision for Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits after ascertaining the exact number and proportion of their population.

What is the more disaggregated data on the status of Dalits professing and practising different faith/religion is also called for. This would certainly help the policy makers not only to assess the socio-economic profile but also it would help them make policies which in turn would help these discriminated and excluded communities to be part of the national mainstream and contribute to the nation's growth as equal citizens.