

THE 'UNTOUCHABLES'

In India, 'Untouchables' Convert To Christianity -- and Face Extra Bias

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MEDIPALLY, India -- Every Sunday, women and children gather to pray in a tiny, whitewashed church on the edge of this southern Indian village, sitting cross-legged on blue plastic sheets as they sing Christian hymns.

The men don't dare to come. "If they are seen in the church, the officials will be informed," says Vativally Aharon, Medipally's Baptist pastor.

Almost all the Christians here -- and the overwhelming majority across India -- hail from the so-called Dalit community, the former "untouchables" relegated to the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Under India's constitution, Dalits are entitled to affirmative-action benefits, including 15% of all federal government jobs and admissions in government-funded universities. That provides the country's most downtrodden with a way to escape their traditional occupations such as emptying village latrines, burying cow carcasses, and tanning animal hides.



Only women and children risk expressing their religious beliefs in the Dalit community in Medipally, India.

But there is a catch: Any Dalit caught abandoning Hinduism for Christianity or Islam loses these privileges, and can be fired from jobs gained under the quota. The rules are enforced by vigilant local officials who keep a close eye on villagers' comings and goings.

The plight of India's secret converts, ignored for decades, is now at the forefront of national politics. Partly driving the change is Indian Christians' new partnership with Islam, a religion frequently at odds with Christianity elsewhere in the world.

Representatives of the two religions have turned to the courts to restore benefits to converted Dalits. India's Supreme Court is currently reviewing several challenges filed by Christian and Muslim Dalits that could result in an overturning of the affirmative-action exclusion. A separate bill to remove the restriction is pending in Parliament. Government members, influenced by India's 150-million-strong Muslim community, have indicated their cautious support.

For decades, backers of the existing legislation have argued that since Christianity and Islam have no caste, Dalits who abandon Hinduism find equality amid their new co-religionists and therefore no longer need special protection.

Scrapping the Ban

But the movement to end official discrimination against these converts is gaining momentum in the world's largest democracy. This year, a special government-appointed commission, headed by former Supreme Court Chief Justice Ranganath Mishra, concluded that Dalits retain their stigma in India's society even after converting and recommended scrapping the ban.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination earlier this year also formally rebuked India for denying affirmative-action benefits to Dalit converts to Christianity and Islam, and recommended that the prohibition be removed.

"The government of India seems quite sympathetic" to such demands, says Sardar Buta Singh, a minister-level official who heads India's agency overseeing Dalit affairs, the National Commission for Scheduled Castes. "All the parties have started thinking about this problem, and it can be solved."

India's Dalits have tried over the centuries to escape their low status, which Hindu scriptures teach is a punishment for sins in a previous life, by embracing caste-less religions. In centuries past most converts turned to Islam, a religion professed by many Indian rulers before the British seized the subcontinent in the 19th century.

But with India's expanding economy offering unprecedented opportunities for social and economic advancement, a great many Dalits are now turning to Christianity, attracted by benefits like education and health care that are sometimes offered by Western-funded congregations. This allows them to seek opportunities beyond the government sector, in the booming information-technology and services industries that put a premium on the Westernized outlook and English-language skills.

Much to the dismay of Hindu nationalist groups, the number of India's secret Christians has climbed in recent years to an estimated 25 million people, about the size of the officially registered Christian population.

The gains among secret Christians come despite the obvious risks: Affirmative-action benefits often mean the difference between grinding poverty and a glimmer of hope for better life.

A lanky 30-year-old with a trimmed mustache, Venkatesh Gunti was born into a Dalit household here in Medipally, a cluster of pastel-colored homes set in the rolling green hills of Andhra Pradesh state. Since his teenage years, Mr. Gunti frequently prayed in the village's Zion church, established by South African missionaries. Three years ago, he found a prized job that would have allowed him to escape the misery of rural life -- as a handyman in a government college in the town of Bhongir.

The job was reserved for a Dalit, and Mr. Gunti had to produce a "scheduled caste" certificate -- something he believed would be a mere formality.

But when Mr. Gunti applied for it at the local government revenue collection office, the clerk, Mr. Gunti recalls, refused to issue the document. According to reports filed by the village secretary, Mr. Gunti was a regular churchgoer and therefore no longer qualified for "scheduled caste" status. He didn't get the job and had to stay in the village, eking out a living as a manual laborer.



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Zoologist Mukesh Kumar says he was denied a job because he converted to Islam.

To gain back the affirmative-action benefits, Mr. Gunti says he had to pretend that he had reverted to Hinduism, participating in a Hindu religious festival when he knew that the village secretary was watching. Last year, the subterfuge finally worked, and Mr. Gunti was reclassified as a member of the "scheduled caste." He says he won't partake in any more Hindu rituals, but will also steer clear of the church. Mr. Gunti has yet to find a new job.

Questioned about the case, Raghu Rama Rao, Medipally's village secretary, explains that he has no choice. "This is the law -- if we'll come to know they go to church, we'll have to make an inquiry and submit a report," Mr. Rao says in his home, its outer wall sporting a poster for a Hindu nationalist organization. Mr. Rao adds that he's already showing kindness by reporting only the active churchgoers, and leaving alone those believed Christian Dalits who do not openly flaunt their faith.

Such thorough enforcement means that secret lives have to be lived throughout India's society. "If they ever find out I'm a Christian, I will lose my position, no question about it," says a Dalit schoolteacher who behaves as a Hindu when he teaches in a state school near Medipally but decorates his Hyderabad apartment with pictures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary.

"The government is forcing us to lie," echoes Prasadarao Yadavalli, a 48-year-old official in Andhra Pradesh's state bureaucracy who rose to his post thanks to Dalit quotas while hiding his Christian faith. Mr. Yadavalli says he has decided to finally come out this year, as he could no longer maintain this double life: "Whatever the consequences, God will take care of us."

Even one of the Dalit converts who petitioned India's Supreme Court is keeping his true beliefs secret from neighbors.

Mukesh Kumar, a zoologist, complained in an affidavit submitted to the Supreme Court in 2005 that he was denied a university job reserved for Dalits because he converted to

Islam. His wife, Reena, added in the same affidavit that she also wants to embrace Islam but is afraid to do so because she would lose her current job of village administrator, an elected position gained under the Dalit quota.

Posters of Holy Men

Interviewed in his village of Neyazoopura, in the northern Uttar Pradesh state, an agitated Dr. Kumar -- who helps his wife run the village administration -- initially denied any link with the Muslim religion. His office is decorated with posters of Hindu holy men. Only after hastily chasing away curious villagers and shutting the doors would Dr. Kumar, 37, confirm his signature on the affidavit. "It's a constitutional right to change a religion at any time if you want it," he says.

India's 1950 constitution indeed guarantees the freedom of faith, in addition to outlawing discrimination against the Dalits. But, in defining who is entitled to affirmative-action protection afforded to the Dalits, a 1950 presidential order excluded any "person who professes a religion different from Hinduism."

The rule was amended in 1956 to include Dalit Sikhs and in 1990 to embrace Dalit Buddhists, on the grounds that these two religions can be considered offshoots of Hinduism.

Indian Christian groups have tried for decades to win a similar exception for Christianity, which is believed to have arrived in India when St. Thomas disembarked in Kerala in the first century. A bill to do so was approved by the national government in 1996, but never made it to a Parliament vote because of a coalition crisis that prompted new elections; these were won by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

The party is a staunch opponent of conversions from Hinduism, now practiced by 80.5% of the general population. "People convert to Christianity here mostly because of aggressive proselytizing by missionaries, who induce very gullible people. This must be stopped," says Ram Madhav, a spokesman and national executive member of Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh, or RSS, a powerful organization that promotes Hindu nationalist ideology and is affiliated with the BJP.

The years of BJP rule were marked by violence against Muslim and Christian minorities. Facing a common enemy, India's Christian and Muslim organizations joined forces in protecting the country's secular tradition. Christian groups organized relief for Muslim refugees from religious pogroms in the state of Gujarat in 2002, and Christian churches were sheltered in some Muslim areas. Though the BJP has denied that some of its leaders helped orchestrate religious violence, the U.S. has since canceled the visa of Gujarat's chief minister, a BJP member, because of his role in the 2002 bloodshed.

"The Christians and the Muslims are a minority in India, they are both oppressed, and so there is a natural alliance between us," says Mahmood Madani, a Parliament member and secretary-general of Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind, the country's leading Islamic body.

Viewing the Dalits as the main source of potential converts, some Christian and Muslim organizations started working together in recent years among these communities. While discrimination against Dalits is illegal, it is in practice widespread, particularly in rural parts of India, where people from higher castes often won't touch a Dalit or share with them food or water.

Here in Andhra Pradesh, Muslim and Christian leaders now regularly break this barrier of untouchability as they organize festive meals in Dalit villages, eating from the same giant plate of rice and vegetable curry.

"This is a real physical demonstration against caste discrimination," says Joseph D'souza, the president of the All-India Christian Council, who has organized many of these gatherings.

Though no open proselytizing is conducted at these events, shared meals frequently end up producing new converts. "The condition of Dalits is like that of dogs in India," says P.K. Ahmad Sabir, Andhra Pradesh state leader of Jamiat Ulema-e-Hind and Mr. D'souza's partner in the Dalit outreach effort. "Our religions -- Christianity and Islam -- teach that everyone is an equal. Hindus don't believe in this, which gives a good chance to Christianity and Islam."

Joining Forces

In 2004, the votes of India's religious minorities helped oust the BJP government, bringing into office a center-left coalition led by the traditionally secularist Indian National Congress. This time around, the Muslims joined the earlier Christian campaign to end the discrimination against Dalit converts, and the issue returned to the government agenda.

"The Christian community has realized it is small compared to the Muslims, and that if they stand alone, they have a much smaller chance for success," says Tahir Mahmood, one of India's most prominent constitutional experts. "Together, they're a force to be reckoned with, and so they've become friends in adversity."

Instead of merely adding a waiver for Christianity to the 1950 presidential order, advocates today demand that any reference to religion be deleted from it altogether.

Campaigners are pressing the government to act without delay. "This is not just a Christian problem," says Jose Daniel, president of the National Coordination Committee for Scheduled Caste Christians and one of the petitioners in the Supreme Court challenge against the anticonvert rules. "It's a denial of rights to all the Dalits in India."

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