

QUARTERLY

# AMBEDKAR VISION

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**USCIRF Once  
Again Raises  
Concern Over  
'Declining Religious  
Freedom' in India**



*Ambedkar Society for South Asia*

# QUARTERLY AMBEDKAR VISION

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The 'Ambedkar Vision' is an effort to take forward the mission initiated by great social reformer and activist Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to end the caste based discrimination and exploitation on the basis of social status or religion and to create caste free society. The Ambedkar Vision is trying to knock at the doors of the political powers of the region and also concerned international forums by highlighting the atrocities being committed against the oppressed and marginalized classes. We expect our readers to join us in this endeavor through their opinions and mentors as a contribution to public awareness & understanding of the issues of marginalized communities of South Asia.

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*Ambedkar Society for South Asia*



from  
the Editor 

The articles featured in this edition of Ambedkar Vision shed light on the social discriminations, religious and human rights violation in South Asia. The USCIRF's concerns about 'Declining Religious Freedom' in India demand a thoughtful examination, while the investigation into rising violence against Christians emphasizes the need for communal harmony. The call for a Comprehensive Caste Census in India is not just a statistical endeavor but a pathway to social justice and prosperity. Delving into the environmental impact, the question of whether Dalits and Adivasis bear the brunt of pollution is an imperative exploration, revealing the interconnectedness of environmental and social issues. In Bangladesh the Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council's plea for approval and activists advocating for political representation. In Pakistan's minority rights march underline the ongoing struggle for inclusive governance. Nepal's journey towards democracy and a casteless society adds a positive note, showcasing the gradual but significant progress in the region. Indian Christians seeking participation in state polls signifies a demand for equal representation, while Deelip Mhaske's lone battle against caste discrimination is a poignant narrative, exemplifying the persistent struggles faced by marginalized communities. Ambedkar Vision stands witness to remarkable developments, reflecting the ever-evolving narrative of inclusivity and the enduring legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. In Pakistan Buner's first woman minority candidate entering the upcoming elections exemplifies a positive shift towards diverse political representation, echoing the principles of equality that Dr. Ambedkar championed. The unveiling of the tallest statue of Ambedkar outside India in the United States marks a global acknowledgment of his impact on social justice and human rights. This symbolic gesture transcends borders, emphasizing the universal relevance of Ambedkar's ideals in the pursuit of a just society. The article shedding light on VT Rajshekar, a journalist and anti-caste legend, underscores the power of voices that fearlessly speak against caste-based discrimination. Rajshekar's legacy serves as a reminder of the ongoing battle against social injustice and the importance of robust journalism in shaping a more equitable society. As we navigate these narratives, Ambedkar Vision continues to serve as a platform for thought-provoking discussions and reflections, amplifying the voices that contribute to the vision of an inclusive world inspired by the teachings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.

# India investigates rising violence against Christians



**Attacks against Christians are rising, fuelled by right-wing nationalism, while growing numbers of Christians are being arrested under anti-conversion laws.**

Two investigations are underway into the alarming rise in attacks against Christians and other religious minorities in India. The United Christian Forum (UCF) has recorded 525 violent attacks to the end of August 2023, more than for the entire previous year. The UCF say attacks are rising 'not just year-on-year, but month-on-month'.

Investigations are being carried out by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and the Indian government's Minorities Commission.

UCF has recorded 525 violent incidents across 23 Indian states to August 2023. This is a sharp increase on the figure of 505 attacks for the whole of 2022, suggesting an annualised rise of more than 45 per cent.

## **Anti-conversion laws**

UCF says the growing violence follows the passing of sweeping anti-conversion laws in almost 40 per cent of India's 28 states. Most of those states are governed by the ruling nationalist BJP.

And UCF say the number of attacks against Christians has risen significantly since Premier Narendra Modi's BJP took power in 2014. Anti-conversion laws supposedly target conversion by force or allurement. But the loose wording means any kind of charitable work could be considered a form of bribery.

Congregations accused of forced conversion have had their buildings ransacked and property destroyed. The United Christian Forum say 520 Christians have now been arrested and accused of forced conversions. According to

International Christian Concern, since 2020 nearly 400 Christians have been charged and jailed in Uttar Pradesh alone. 50 were arrested in September.

## **'Weaponising the law'**

The US-based Indian American Muslim Council (IAMC) has accused BJP states of weaponising religious conversion laws to target religious minorities.

According to IAMC in Uttar Pradesh this September 17 Christians were arrested accused of bribing Hindus to convert to Christianity.

In the same state a Christian couple were arrested at their wedding along with nine pastors including the bride's father, after Hindu nationalists claimed the wedding was a 'conversion event'.

Also in Uttar Pradesh, a pastor, his wife and their three-year-old son were imprisoned after holding a prayer service in their home. Pastor Harendra Singh and his wife Priya were taken into custody charged with 'luring innocent people to Christianity'. They had no choice but to bring their young child with them into the prison.

There are signs that the higher authorities may be saying enough is enough. In September, the High Court in Allahabad supported the right of Christians to share their teaching and give away Bibles. The court granted bail to Christians accused of breaking the anti-conversion law.

Dismissing the prosecution case to withhold bail, the High Court stated that the accused 'were involved in providing good teachings to children and promoting the spirit of brotherhood among the villagers.' The High Court ruled that distributing Bibles and educating children could not constitute an offence under the anti-conversion law in Uttar Pradesh.

**'Alarming rise'  
'The rise in attacks against Christians in India is deeply alarming,' says Release International CEO Paul Robinson. 'Equally worrying is the denial in**

**India that anti-Christian violence is indeed growing. We hope these investigations and reports will be received as a clear call to both India and the international community to stop the violence.'**

**'Release International welcomes this ruling and will be looking for it to take effect throughout the state,' says Paul Robinson, the CEO of RI, which supports persecuted Christians worldwide. 'More than that, we hope that other states will now review and reconsider their own anti-conversion laws.'**

### **Targeting Christians**

Human Rights Watch (HRW) claim these laws are often misused by police to target Christians, particularly from the Dalit or Adivasi communities.

India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, heads the UCF list of states most hostile towards Christians. Others include Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand.

And in Manipur, the Telegraph India reported 254 churches were damaged in recent tribal clashes. The UCF say 'all these incidents are mob violence led by vigilante groups'.

Human Rights Watch also flag up the growing attacks. They state: 'Over the last decade there has been an undeniable increase in the number and frequency of attacks against religious minorities in India, especially Muslims and Christians.'

HRW argue that under the BJP violence is being 'normalised' against minorities and impunity is becoming institutionalised.

### **'Violence provoked'**

HRW told USCIRF, 'Violence is often being provoked... during Hindu religious processions led by BJP-affiliated groups, in which some brandish swords and weapons.'

Also giving evidence to USCIRF was the UN Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues Fernand de Varennes. He warned: 'India risks becoming one of the world's main generators of instability, atrocities and violence, because of the massive scale and gravity of the violations and abuses targeting mainly religious and other minorities such as Muslims, Christians, Sikhs... It is systematic and a reflection of religious nationalism.'

Since 2020 USCIRF has been recommending that the US Department of State should designate India as a country of

particular concern.

And a recent Persecution Trends report by UK-based Release International also named India as a nation where persecution was rising alarmingly.

Along with the USCIRF inquiry, a parallel investigation is being conducted by India's Minorities Commission. But Christian leaders said it had failed to reassure them that the BJP was serious about addressing persecution that was targeting the church.

UCF spokesman John Dayal pointed out to the Catholic News Agency that 'the Commission has no Christian member.'

### **'Alarming rise'**

**'The rise in attacks against Christians in India is deeply alarming,' says Release International CEO Paul Robinson. 'Equally worrying is the denial in India that anti-Christian violence is indeed growing. We hope these investigations and reports will be received as a clear call to both India and the international community to stop the violence.'**

Release International has long been working in India help the church respond to attacks and equips them. RI partners have provided legal aid to those accused of fraudulent conversions and have held conferences for pastors in areas facing significant cases of intimidation and violence. RI also provides Bibles in local languages.

India is the world's largest democracy. Hindus make up around 75 per cent of the population, Muslims some 14 per cent and Christians around 5 per cent.

The country's constitution guarantees full religious freedom of worship and witness.

UK-based Release International is active in around 30 countries. It works through partners to prayerfully, pastorally and practically support the families of Christian martyrs. It supports prisoners of faith and their families, Christians suffering oppression and violence and those forced to flee.

*Source: Release International*

# Tallest statue of Ambedkar outside India unveiled in US

A statue of Dr B R Ambedkar, the principal architect of India's Constitution was formally inaugurated in a Maryland suburb in Washington. It is touted to be the tallest statue of Ambedkar outside India. During the inauguration of the statue, chants of 'Jai Bhim' were heard. According to the PTI news agency, more than 500 Indian-Americans from various parts of the US and some from India and other countries attended the unveiling ceremony of the 19-foot tall "Statue of Equality".

The statue was made by renowned artist and sculptor Ram Sutar, who also built the statue of Sardar Patel, called as Statue of Unity and installed on an island in Narmada, metres downstream of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat. "We are calling it the Statue of Equality... this (inequality) is not only the problem in India, everywhere (in) different forms (it exists)," Ram Kumar, president of the Ambedkar International Center (AIC) told PTI after the statue unveiling ceremony.

The "Statue of Equality" represents 1.4 billion Indians and 4.5 million Indian Americans, said Deelip Mhaske from New York who leads the Ambedkarite movement in the US. "Although this is completely done through community contributions, we received congratulatory messages from Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar stating 'Ambedkarite has put the foundation of Unified India in the USA and globally'," he said.

"This statue will not just inspire millions of Indians residing in the US but all communities including Black, Hispanic and others!" Mhaske said. "This is a historic step towards unifying the Indian-American diaspora and working towards making India a superpower not just in technology but also in social justice," he said.

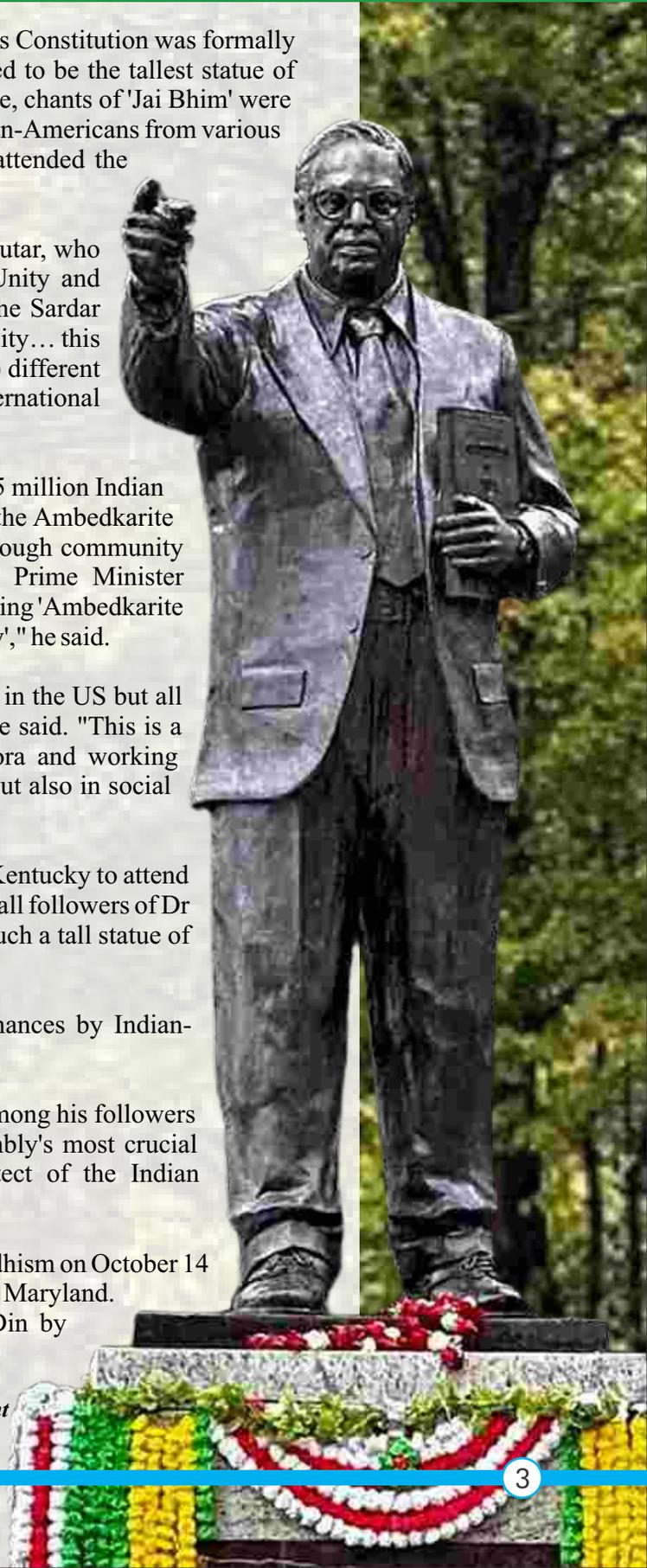
Mahindra Rajwade, who drove for more than 10 hours from Kentucky to attend the statue unveiling ceremony, said this is a proud moment for all followers of Dr Ambedkar. "This is the first time in the world that we have such a tall statue of Babasaheb outside India".

The unveiling ceremony was followed by cultural performances by Indian-Americans from various parts of the country.

Born on April 14, 1891, Dr Bhim Rao Ambedkar - popular among his followers as Babasaheb - was the chairman of the Constituent Assembly's most crucial Drafting Committee that earned him the moniker Architect of the Indian Constitution.

He died on December 6, 1956, months after he embraced Buddhism on October 14 that year, the date coinciding with the unveiling of the statue in Maryland. October 14 is celebrated as Dhamma Chakra Parivartan Din by Ambedkarites.

*Source: Live Mint*



# Deelip Mhaske's lonely fight against caste discrimination

Deelip Mhaske, a 43-year-old Princeton attorney, is fighting a lonely battle in New Jersey and nationally to get lawmakers to add caste as a protected class under state and federal anti-discrimination laws, according to media reports. Mhaske, who has six master's degrees from universities like Harvard, Rutgers and Johns Hopkins and worked at the White House, says he has been discriminated against because of his Dalit caste. Because of his caste, he told the New Jersey Monitor he's been denied promotions, barred from temples and social gatherings and threatened for his advocacy on behalf of others like him. Mhaske, who has started a nonprofit called Human Horizon to fight caste discrimination, told the daily he has reached out to most of the New Jersey Legislature's 120 members with little success.

The lone lawmaker who's embraced his cause, Assemblywoman Sadaf Jaffer (D-Somerset), will leave office and said she's not sure if she'd introduce a bill before she goes. Nationally, Mhaske successfully lobbied California legislators to pass what would have been the nation's first ban on caste discrimination - but Gov. Gavin Newsom earlier this month vetoed the bill, calling special protection because of caste unnecessary.

While India banned caste discrimination in 1948, it persists culturally and because of the Indian diaspora, it has spread worldwide, Mhaske told the Monitor. More than 4 million Indian Americans and 2.5 million Hindus live in the United States, census figures and Pew data show. Indians are the largest demographic in New Jersey's growing South Asian population and New Jersey has the biggest share of Hindus of any U.S. state - according to Pew, 3% of adults here are Hindu.

"They are bringing in the culture of India and Hinduism here - and they're bringing caste and they don't treat the lower caste as human beings," Mhaske was quoted as saying. "Wherever you go, there will be always discrimination. As a civilized person, our responsibility is to remove that discrimination. Irrespective of your birth, which country you came from, which parents you came from, you - as a citizen of this democratic country and one of the oldest democracies - should be able to protect people who are vulnerable." It's tough to track how common caste discrimination is in New Jersey, the Monitor said as the State police, the state Attorney General's Office's civil rights division or the state Civil Service Commission, do not specifically track caste-related claims. Mhaske also claimed that many temples exclude low-caste people, denying them entry and forbidding their participation in rituals and events. Caste bias doesn't disappear at the temple doors, he told the Monitor.

"The rise of temples throughout the country is really, really alarming for us because that's the center point of starting the caste system untouchability and discrimination," Mhaske was quoted as saying. If lawmakers added caste as a protected class under New Jersey's Law Against Discrimination, he added, policymakers would have a better idea of how often it occurs and victims would have better protections.

Recognizing the threat of caste discrimination, universities like Harvard, Brandeis and Brown have added caste as a specially protected class under their anti-discrimination policies, Monitor noted. Rutgers University faculty approved a contract in April with caste discrimination protections after their five-day strike for better pay and working conditions. Seattle in February became the first U.S. city to ban caste discrimination and California would have been the first state to do so. While Congress held a hearing on caste discrimination in 2005, federal lawmakers haven't acted to ban it. Mhaske told the Monitor he suspects New Jersey lawmakers' reluctance to sponsor a bill against caste discrimination is rooted in a fear of turning off high-caste donors.

"They are more interested in getting elected. All governors and legislators are controlled by donations," he was quoted as saying.

*Courtesy: American Bazaaronline.com*



# Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council calls for approval of minorities commission

Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council has demanded the introduction and approval of the “National Minorities Commission” bill promised by Kabir Bin Anwar, co-chairman of the Awami League's Election Administration Committee, during a mass hunger strike and sit-in at the Central Shaheed Minar in Dhaka.

The demand was made at a central committee meeting of the Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Unity Council.

Presided over by Prof Dr Neem Chandra Bhowmik, General Secretary of the organization Rana Dasgupta delivered the inaugural speech, reads a press release.

Central leaders, presidents and general secretaries of all district and metropolitan committees spoke at the meeting held at Kochi Kachar Mela Auditorium in the capital's Segun Bagicha.

In the resolution

adopted at the meeting, a specific roadmap was expected in the speech of the leader of the house that would carry out the pledges outlined in the 2018 election manifesto, regarding the fulfillment of various commitments aimed at benefiting religious and ethnic minority groups.

The resolution strongly demanded appropriate measures to stop the ongoing communal violence and attacks ahead of the upcoming puja.

The council also demanded the Awami League to reschedule its mega rally announced on the ninth day of the upcoming Durga Puja on October 23.

They urged the ruling party to hold the mega rally at the historic Suhrawardy Udyan on November 4.

*Source: Dhaka Tribune*



# Why India Needs a Comprehensive Caste Census for Social Justice and Prosperity?



People who believe in caste hierarchy, graded inequality and endogamy are invariably against caste census. The majority of critics of caste census are more often than not advocates of caste hierarchy. The critics fear that if it happens, they may lose their privilege. They frame an imaginary and baseless narrative that caste census may lead to social fragmentation, caste enmities and weaken the Hindu identity. It may be used for political manipulation and mobilization. The critics spread rumors that caste censuses may face logistical and methodological difficulties, such as defining and enumerating the caste categories, ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the data and dealing with possible errors and anomalies in data collection and processing.

## Why India Needs a Caste Census

India is a diverse and complex society, with a population of over 1.4 billion people belonging to various caste groups. Caste is an ancient social hierarchy based on occupation and economic status, with roots in historical Hindu Scriptures. People in India are born into a particular caste and tend to keep many aspects of their social life within its boundaries, including whom they marry and whom they choose to count as their close friends. Caste also has a significant impact on the socio-economic and political opportunities and outcomes of people in India. Members of lower castes, such as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other

Backward Classes (OBC), have historically faced discrimination and exclusion from mainstream society and the economy. They have also been subjected to atrocities and violence by the dominant castes, who often enjoy social and political privileges.

The last caste census in India was conducted in 1931, during British colonial rule. Since then, the census has only collected data on SC and ST, but not on OBC or other castes.

The only exception was the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) of 2011, which was meant to collect data on the economic status and caste identity of every household in India. However, the SECC data has not been made public yet, due to various methodological and political issues.

The lack of reliable and comprehensive caste data poses several challenges for policymakers and society at large. Some of these challenges are:

1. The reservation policies are based on outdated and incomplete caste data, which may not reflect the current realities and needs of the caste groups.
2. The absence of caste data also hampers the monitoring and evaluation of the reservation policies and their impact on the socio-economic development of the lower castes.
3. Without proper data, it is difficult to assess whether the reservation policies are reaching the intended beneficiaries and whether they are reducing caste-based inequalities and discrimination.
4. The lack of caste data also prevents the

**The reservation policies are based on outdated and incomplete caste data, which may not reflect the current realities and needs of the caste groups.**

recognition and representation of the diversity and plurality of the caste groups in India. Caste is not a monolithic or static category but a dynamic and heterogeneous one, with variations across regions, religions, languages and cultures.

Caste data can help to capture the diversity and complexity of the caste groups and their identities, aspirations and grievances. It can also help to foster dialogue and understanding among the different caste groups and promote social harmony and cohesion.

Therefore, there is a need for a caste census in India, which can provide accurate and updated data on the caste composition and distribution of the population. A caste census can help to inform and improve reservation policies and other welfare schemes for the lower castes, as well as enhance the social and political participation and empowerment of the caste groups. A caste census can also contribute to the democratization and decentralization of governance and development processes by enabling the participation and representation of local communities and their interests.

The idea of caste-based reservation was originally conceived by William Hunter and Jyotirao Phule in 1882. The first instance of reservation was introduced by Shahu Maharaj, the Maharaja of Kolhapur, in 1902, who reserved 50% of government jobs for backward classes. The British government granted separate electorates for different religious and caste groups in 1932, known as the Communal Award. This was later modified by the Poona Pact, which reserved seats for depressed classes within Hindu electorates. The first amendment to the Constitution in 1951 legalized caste-based reservation and empowered the state governments to identify and list the backward classes.

The first commission to do justice with OBCs was made in 1953 and submitted its report in 1955 but on a meaningless pretext, the report was dumped by the

**The lack of reliable and comprehensive caste data poses several challenges for policymakers and society at large.**



**Without proper data, it is difficult to assess whether the reservation policies are reaching the intended beneficiaries and whether they are reducing caste-based inequalities and discrimination.**

Nehru government.

The second OBC commission, the Mandal Commission report, was submitted in 1980 and recommended 27% reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in central government jobs. It was implemented by Prime Minister V.P. Singh in 1990, sparking widespread protests and violence.

The Supreme Court, in the Indra Sawhney case in 1992, upheld the validity of the Mandal Commission report but imposed a 50% cap on the reservation and excluded the creamy layer (the affluent and elite) from the OBC quota. The Parliament, in 2019, passed the 103rd constitutional amendment, which allowed 10% reservation for economically weaker sections (EWS) among the general category in education and government jobs.

A caste census will ensure social justice for all castes and social justice will further pave the way for prosperity in every caste. Economic, social and cultural prosperity would break the narrow and hollow walls of caste supremacy in India. The caste census should not be seen as an end in itself but as a means to an end, which is the realization of the constitutional vision of a democratic, secular and egalitarian India.

*Source: themooknayak.com*

# Buner's first woman minority candidate to stand in upcoming elections

Dr Saveera Parkash is set to be the first woman minority candidate to stand in the forthcoming general elections from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Buner district after submitting her nomination papers for the general seat of PK-25.

Saveera, a member of the Hindu community, is hopeful of contesting the elections on a PPP ticket. Parkash's father Oam Parkash, a recently retired doctor, had been an active member of the party for the past 35 years.

According to local politician Saleem Khan, who is affiliated with the Qaumi Watan Party, Parkash is the first woman from Buner to have submitted her nomination papers to contest the upcoming elections from the general seat.

Parkash completed her MBBS from the Abbottabad International Medical College in 2022 and is also the general secretary of the PPP women's wing in Buner.

Talking to Dawn.com, Parkash said she wanted to follow in the footsteps of her father in working for the area's poor. She said she had submitted her nomination papers on December 23.

She emphasised her desire to work for the welfare of women in the area, to ensure a safe space for them and to help them attain their rights. She said women have

been “suppressed and neglected”, especially with regard to the development sector.

When asked about the party providing her a ticket, she expressed the hope she would get one, stating that the “senior leadership” had requested her father to let her run for the general seat.

She said “serving humanity is in my blood” due to her medical background, highlighting that her dream to become an elected legislator stemmed from having experienced poor management and helplessness in government hospitals as a doctor.

Imran Noshad Khan, a social media influencer from Buner, told Dawn.com that he wholeheartedly endorsed the candidate, irrespective of her political affiliation.

He added that she was “breaking stereotypes perpetuated by traditional patriarchy”, highlighting that it was necessary to recognise that it took 55 years “since Buner merged with Pakistan for a woman to step forward and contest in elections”.

According to the ECP's recent amendments, a five per cent inclusion of women candidates is mandatory on general seats.

*Source: DAWN*

# VT Rajshekar: Journalist, anti-caste legend who spoke his mind



Suraj Yengde

VTR held no punches when it came to delivering his finest against the hypocrisies of the Brahminical state order. His creed of politics was internationalism. He aligned with the Third World project of radical movements, made alliances with the African-American movements and was a guest of Colonel Gaddafi of Libya.

He spent most of his time attacking the Hindu caste violence. Part of his daring zeal can be attributed to his background. Born in a Dravidian Bunt community, VTR is known to have gangsterised his reign of terror on savarna elites. Bunts were also among the Shudra community who did not employ Brahmins to officiate their rituals until recently. His advocacy for the oppressed saw VTR being a marked man and being booked under India's Terrorism and Anti-Disruptive Activities Act. His passport was impounded by the Congress government and it took the government headed by a fellow Kannadiga, Deva Gowada, to release the document to him.

VTR intervened in the meaning and material of the word Dalit. He professed the 21st century to be the “triumph of Ambedkarism”. He appealed to Dalits, “Let us be proud of our Dalit culture. Black is beautiful.” He saw caste as a marker aligned to race. The Dravidian analogy of Phule and Periyar sat well with his theories. He branded deniers of reservation as “anti-reservation racists”, as the subtitle of one of his books states. VTR authored 30 books centering on caste, nation and religion. His most famous work remains Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India. Not an easy read for the uninitiated, this book communicated with the liberation struggles outside India. It inspired contemporary African-American activists to develop solidarity with the Dalits. VTR borrowed from the radical movement of Africans and African Americans and the anti-capitalist, anti-imperial struggles of the world.

His invocation of “caste as a nation within the nation” was a reference to the radical Black Americans who saw African-Americans as a colony within the United States

of America. For VTR, caste operated as a nation itself rather than the subsidiary of the nation-state. He described caste as “apartheid in India”. For his continued advocacy and writing, VTR was invited to many important national and international forums. Howard University hosted the 107th birthday celebration of Dr Ambedkar, an event for which they wanted VTR as the chief guest. However, he was not able to procure the required travel documents. The organisers of the event, the Dr Ambedkar Memorial Trust of America and Graduate Student Council, wrote to visa authorities strongly endorsing the calibre of Rajasekhar. The enormity of VTR's work and the humongous archive of Dalit Voice is waiting to be digitised.

The man himself has many stories to share and experiences to embalm the curious ones. Living by his principles and not giving in to the fickleness, VTR has chosen to live all alone in Mangaluru, though he has the luxury of travelling to London, where his son, Salil, the former head of Amnesty International, resides. At the age of 92, he even cooks his own food and actively participates in movements. The father and children argue about the inadequacy of the international community's work in eradicating caste. VTR bemoans the absence of an active pan-Indian Dalit movement today. He was someone who fiercely advocated for Dalit-Muslim unity. He compared the coming together of the two as “petrol and fire” that would burn Brahminical forces. But VTR had to wind up Dalit Voice due to the assault of the BJP, which he rechristened as Brahmana Jaati Party. A grand salute to his remarkable life in a newspaper where he wrote for a quarter of a century is only befitting. He is among the honorable predecessors to the space I hold at Dalitality. As is the case with many anti-caste legends, V T Rajshekar is also not adequately honoured and celebrated for their excellence. To honour his work, I am planning to start a national award for fearless journalists in the name of V T Rajshekar.

*Suraj Yengde, author of Caste Matters, curates Dalitality and is currently at Oxford University.*

# Do Dalits and Adivasis Bear the Brunt of Pollution? Uncovering the Impact



**Ayanabha Banerjee**

As the weather shifts across the country, the notorious 'pollution season' gears up to choke everyone's lungs. Delhi's Air Quality Index has already started to decline, reaching 'poor' levels. Experts predict that it will further deteriorate, as witnessed in previous years. During this period, the annual blame game among state governments in and around the NCR region will soon commence. However, what's worth noting is the population most affected and the precautions required.

Dalits and Adivasis bear the brunt of pollution. While there is no precise research correlating air pollution-related deaths with marginalized communities, the

**According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011, "nearly 79% of Adivasi households and 73% of Dalit households were the most deprived among rural households in India."**

data underscores the necessity of such research. Pollution does not impact everyone uniformly; it intersects with various factors. The study of pollution and climate change requires an intersectional perspective, especially in a nation as diverse as ours.

A significant number of deaths related to air pollution occur within disadvantaged groups. According to a research paper published by the American Lung Association titled "Disparities in the Impact of Air Pollution," certain groups may face higher exposure to pollution due to class bias, housing market dynamics and land costs. The study states, "Firstly, pollution sources tend to be located near disadvantaged communities, increasing exposure to harmful pollutants."

For instance, brick kilns have become a major industry in the state of Haryana, with Jhajjar town gaining recognition for its brick production. Mukul Sharma, a Professor in the Environment Studies department at Ashoka University, discussed the situation of brick kiln workers in his 2023 article

published in the Economic and Political Weekly. He noted, "Brick laborers in Jhajjar are predominantly Dalits belonging to Chamar, Dhanuk, Valmiki, Dagi, Deha, Gagra, Sansi, Khatik, Pasi, Od and Meghwal Scheduled Castes from Jhajjar and other districts of Haryana.

Dalit laborers are also migrating from Punjab, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh for work." He added, "The majority of these kilns operate in an unregulated manner within the informal sector, employing migrant laborers. Systems of contractors, bondage, advance payments, loans and compound interests are prevalent here. Labour exploitation and human rights violations persist in the sector. Simultaneously, the post-liberalization growth of the sector has made Dalit laborers increasingly vulnerable to temperature, heat, emissions and climate impacts."

The study further highlights the impact of fossil fuels on the workers, stating, "The use of coal and other biomass fuels in brick kilns results in emissions of particulate matter (PM), including black carbon, sulphur dioxide, oxides of nitrogen, carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide. These emissions have severe effects on health, climate and vegetation. In recent times, high-ash, high-sulphur coal, industrial waste and loose biomass fuels have been increasingly used in brick kilns due to higher costs and a shortage of good-quality bituminous coal, leading to new air emission challenges. In our interviews, laborers consistently reported respiratory problems, often resulting in serious illnesses such as bronchitis, pneumonia, asthma, pulmonary disorders and a lack of access to medical facilities."

### **Inherent Casteism in the Health Sector**

Secondly, the low social status of certain groups makes them more vulnerable to health threats due to factors related to their disadvantage. According to a 2022 report by Oxfam, healthcare access remains unequal in the country. The report highlights, "Private infrastructure now accounts for nearly 62% of all of India's health infrastructure, making it crucial to assess its responsiveness to these communities. Only 4% of Adivasis and 15% of Dalits use private healthcare facilities. According to the 75th round of NSSO, out-of-pocket expenditure for inpatient care in private facilities is 524% higher than in public facilities. This is unaffordable, considering that 45.9% of Adivasis and 26.6% of Dalits are in the lowest wealth quintile."



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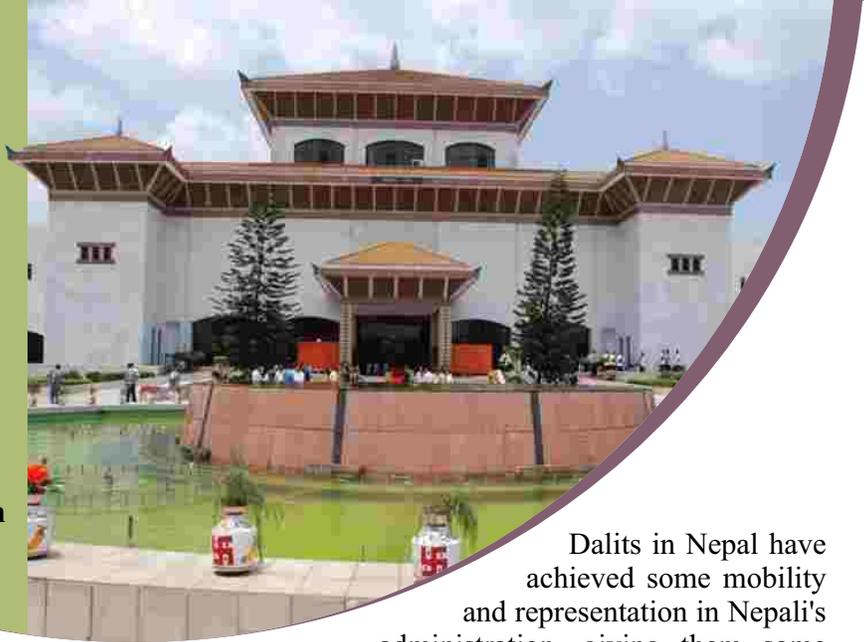
The study also addresses the direct discrimination faced by these communities, stating, "One study found that 94% of Dalit children surveyed faced discrimination in the form of physical contact (receiving sympathetic touches while accessing healthcare), dispensing of medicines (91%) and the conduct of pathological tests (87%). Moreover, 81% of Dalit children were not given as much time as other children."

Thirdly, socio-economic status appears to be linked to greater harm from air pollution, as indicated by multiple large studies. According to the Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011, "nearly 79% of Adivasi households and 73% of Dalit households were the most deprived among rural households in India." A study titled 'Social Disadvantage, Economic Inequality and Life Expectancy in Nine Indian States' reveals that "Adivasis, Dalits and Muslims have lower life expectancies compared to higher-caste Hindus. Adivasi life expectancy is more than 4 years lower, Dalit life expectancy is more than 3 years lower and Muslim life expectancy is about 1 year lower. Economic status explains less than half of these disparities.

*Source: Mooknyak*

# Nepal: A Gradual Journey Towards Democracy and a Casteless Society

Pratikshit Singh



In May 2020, when the world was reeling under the onslaught of Covid, the killing of George Floyd in the United States had stirred the US and the world.

This is also believed to be the reason behind the defeat of Donald Trump in November that year. However, Floyd tragically succumbed to strangulation by a racist white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota, a Dalit youth, along with his five friends, was lynched to death in Rukum west district in Nepal.

The youth, Nabaraj BK, wanted to marry his upper-caste girlfriend, who had called the boy to pick him up, but was chased and beaten to death by the family members of the girl when he came to the girl's village along with five of his friends. The couple did not have the approval of the girl's family for the marriage as the boy belonged to the untouchable caste. The killings had drawn international attention and the United Nations had condemned the incident. In a statement, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet expressed shock over the incident and said, "It is distressing to know that caste-based prejudices remain deeply entrenched in our world in the 21st century."

Earlier, in 2016, Ajit Dhakal Mijar, an 18-year-old young Dalit youth, was found dead under mysterious circumstances. His father filed a first information report, alleging it to be a murder and named three accused. Ajit was in an inter-caste relationship with a girl who belonged to the so-called "dominant caste." However, the police registered the death as suicide. Ajit's father refused to believe the version of the police and took the exhumed body to the hospital, where the corpse is still preserved in a morgue at a Teaching Hospital in Maharajganj, Nepal, as his father refused to perform the last rites until he gets justice. The lower court has acquitted the accused and the deceased's family has pinned hopes on the Supreme Court.

These dastardly incidents come at a time when the

Dalits in Nepal have achieved some mobility and representation in Nepali's administration, giving them some voice after the abolition of the monarchy in 2006.

Caste in Nepal has a deep-rooted history and continues to play a significant role in the country's social, cultural and political landscape. The caste system in Nepal is primarily based on the Hindu varna system, which categorizes people into different social groups or castes. Although the transition to a federal democracy has facilitated perceptible mobility for the Dalits in Nepal, most of whom had to face worse casteism than their Indian counterparts.

## Transition to Democracy: A Ray of Hope for Dalits in Nepal

Nepal has made efforts to address caste-based discrimination through legal reforms. The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) and the subsequent Constitution of Nepal (2015) explicitly prohibit caste-based discrimination and provide affirmative action measures for marginalized groups, including Dalits. However, implementation remains a challenge.

These changes have led to increased discussions about identity, inclusion and social justice, including caste-related issues. It's important to note that while caste continues to be a significant factor in Nepali society, there are ongoing efforts by activists, civil society organizations and the government to promote social inclusion, reduce discrimination and create a more equitable society. One such organization is the Dignity Initiative, an organization that works for Dalit rights.

## Paradigm Shift in Caste Discrimination but Caste Exists in a Different Mould

The Mooknayak spoke to Rup Sunar, who runs the Dignity Initiative. Rup belongs to the Sunar community of Nepal, a caste classified as "untouchable" in Nepal.

He says that there has been a paradigm shift in caste practices in Nepal, at least in urban areas. Earlier, when Nepal was a kingdom, people used to openly commit violence. Dalits willing to eat or have tea had to do it outside the eatery and had to wash their own utensils and glasses afterward, even in urban areas. But these things are no longer practiced in cities, although they are still prevalent in rural areas.

Rup also mentions that caste discrimination may not be as blatant as in the days of the monarchy, but people have to find some pretext to commit caste-based atrocity. For example, in the case of the Soti village massacre in which Nabaraj BK was murdered along with five of his friends, the girl's family accused the slain victims of human trafficking.

Despite all these hiccups, the Dalits are overcoming resistance and have steamrolled their way into success. Prakash Saput is one such Dalit singer who has attained success and made a name in the folk music industry. Earlier, singers from the dominant castes used to hijack the songs of Dalit singers by appropriating them in their names, but today it has become difficult to do so because of awareness and Dalit assertion.

### Political Representation of Dalits

Rup, who has done an extensive study on caste and political representation, points out that the interim constitution (2007) had provisions for the representation of Dalits. "The constitution provided for 40% seats from the first-past-the-post system and 60% from the proportional voting system. This was a quite meaningful arrangement as under FPTP, it's very difficult to find a ticket for Dalit to contest an election. On top of that, they lack financial backup to contest the election. Whereas under the proportional system, parties allocate certain seats for Dalits and they are elected as the electoral strength of the party. Meaning that if parties get 100 seats under proportional representation, 13 would have to be allocated for Dalits."

However, the 2015 Constitution established a federal system with three levels of government: federal, provincial and local. The mixed electoral system reversed the arrangement of the interim constitution and reserved 60% of the seats in the parliament for the First-past-the-post system. Additionally, they also reserved seats for the dominant Khas Arya group. Rup says that although there has been a perceptible improvement in the representation of the Dalits, this arrangement has undermined the reservation system and needs to be more inclusive.



Besides, there is 9% reservation for the Dalit community, who account for around 14% of the total population of the country. To address the underrepresentation of Dalits in the reservation system, a fair allocation of 13 out of every 100 seats is imperative. This adjustment reflects the proportion of their population and necessitates amendments to the electoral system.

So, while democracy has proved to be an enabler for Dalit assertion and awareness, much needs to be done when it comes to securing the rights of the most marginalized community of Nepal. Emerging artists, civil rights activists and growing representation in the parliament provide some hope.

*Source: Mooknayak*



## Indian Christians seek participation in state polls

Christians in a southern Indian state are seeking political participation in upcoming polls to improve their historically marginalized status. In a memorandum, Christians in Telangana asked political parties to field at least two candidates from the Christian community in upcoming assembly polls on Nov. 30. The Christians are mainly Dalits (formerly untouchables) and victims of social and religious prejudice fostered by the centuries-old Hindu caste system.

Representing the entire Christian community, the Telangana State Federation of Churches (TSFC), Telangana Council of Churches (TCC) and the Synod of Telangana (SOT) noted that the community does not have representation in the 119-member assembly despite forming 1.2 million of the state's 35 million population. "We want all parties to allot at least two tickets to Christians," said Father Aloysius Ephrem Raju Alex, deputy secretary of the Telugu Catholic Bishops' Council, a regional body.

"This demand is from the entire Christian community," he told UCA News on Oct. 16. Christians, however, have been unsuccessful in holding meetings with major parties except the opposition Congress so far. Telangana was carved out of southern Andhra Pradesh on June 2, 2014, after massive protests by the Bharat Rashtra Samithi, formerly the Telangana Rashtra Samithi.

The party has ruled India's youngest state since 2014. Telangana is going to the polls along with Christian-majority Mizoram state in the northeast, Rajasthan in the northwest and Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh in central India.

We "succeeded in handing over a memorandum" to the Congress general secretary K. C. Venugopal on Oct. 12, Father Alex said. The memorandum included demands

like quotas in the lower house of the assembly and representation in next year's national polls. The Congress leader "listened to us but did not give any assurance about our demand for Christian candidates," Alex said.

Christians are a minority in Telangana, while Catholics constitute roughly half of all Christians in the state. Under the Hindu caste system, Dalits are placed on the lowest stratum. Millions of Dalits converted to more egalitarian religions like Christianity in the hope of escaping the clutches of the caste system, which segregates people based on their vocations.

The extension of certain benefits under India's affirmative action to Dalit Christians is a contentious issue and has been the subject of court battles. Affirmative action promises job quotas and the reservation of seats in India's parliament and state assemblies.

Christians in Telangana want political parties to unveil a plan covering the community's education, healthcare and employment and land for burial grounds. In the memorandum, they sought insurance cover for pastors, priests, nuns and other religious people working in the state. "We will try our best to hand over the memorandum to all political parties," Alex added.

India's Supreme Court is currently hearing a bunch of petitions arguing for Dalit Christians to qualify for scheduled caste status to get the benefits of affirmative action. Of the 543 seats in India's parliament, 84 are reserved for 200 million Dalit people, officially known as scheduled castes and 47 are reserved for 104 million scheduled tribes. Christians make up just 2.4 percent of India's massive population of 1.4 billion and Dalit Christian leaders claim that 80 percent of Indian Christians are of Dalit-origin.

*Source: UCA News*

# USCIRF Once Again Raises Concern Over 'Declining Religious Freedom' in India



The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has once again noted with concern that “religious freedom conditions in India have notably declined in recent years”.

During a hearing on 'Advancing Religious Freedom within the US - India Bilateral Relationship' on September 20, USCIRF highlighted the Indian government's legal framework and enforcement of “discriminatory policies against religious minorities”, a press statement said.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the US Congress to monitor, analyse and report on religious freedom abroad. The governmental body makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

The hearing on September 20 discussed “enforced discriminatory policies targeting religious minorities”, the recent violence in Haryana's Nuh and targeted attacks against Christians and Jewish minorities in Manipur. The participants of the hearing offered policy options for the United States to work with India to combat abuses of religious freedom and related human rights in the country.

“Religious freedom conditions in India have notably declined in recent years,” said USCIRF chair Abraham Cooper. “Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Dalits and Adivasis are experiencing increased levels of attacks and acts of intimidation. Authorities have continued to suppress minority voices and those advocating on their behalf. These trends and their implication for US foreign policy, should not be ignored.”



The US body also called for the release of religious prisoners in India. According to USCIRF's Frank. R Wolf Freedom of Religion or Belief Victims List, a public database, a total of 37 individuals across multiple faiths have been jailed for the “peaceful exercise of their freedom of religion or belief”.

During the hearing, the participants drew attention to Meeran Haider and Rupesh Singh, who have been imprisoned for protesting against the deterioration of religious freedom, the press statement said.

Haider, a Jamia Millia Islamia student and a youth leader of Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), was arrested by the special cell of Delhi Police in connection with his alleged involvement in violence in North East Delhi in February 2020. Singh, an independent journalist, was arrested by Jharkhand Police on July 17, 2022, for his alleged links with the outlawed Communist Party of India (Maoist).

“Haider was targeted for leading peaceful protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and was charged with offences under the UAPA [Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act ]. Singh is a freelance journalist known for his reporting on state violence and discrimination against Adivasis. He has been detained since July 2022, also under the UAPA,” said USCIRF vice-chair Frederick A. Davie.

He further said, “USCIRF calls on the Indian government to evaluate these cases and to release all prisoners of conscience and those detained for peacefully expressing their religion or belief.”

Since June 2020, USCIRF has called on President Joe Biden to designate India as a “Country of Particular Concern” for the Modi government's “systematic, ongoing and egregious violations of religious freedom”. In May this year, for the fourth consecutive year, USCIRF advised that the US administration should designate India as a 'Country of Particular Concern,' despite this recommendation not having been accepted since 2020.

*Source: The Wire*

# Activists call for greater political representation in Pakistan's 'first' minority rights march



Hundreds of people from all walks of life gathered at Karachi's Frere Hall on the occasion of National Minority Day to campaign against issues faced by minorities in society and urge the government to respect their rights.

Minority Rights March 2023 was organised by political, religious, social, non-profit and government organisations. "This is the first-ever minority rights march in Pakistan," Moneeza, one of the organisers.

The march was attended by politicians, lawyers and human rights activists, including Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Junior, the only son of slain PPP leader Murtaza Bhutto.

The participants of the march — clad in traditional saaris and colorful turbans — chanted slogans against the biased system in unison and danced to the beat of Hindu garbas.

A drama depicting the perils of minority communities in Pakistan was also performed at the march by Tehrik-e-Niswan, cultural action group.

Speaking to Dawn.com, artist Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Jr said: "Judicially, constitutionally, in the field of education, labour, finance and agriculture, religious minorities have made sacrifices and contributed for the betterment of Pakistan.

"We are all one people and I refuse to let us be divided."

According to him, Pakistan is and always had been a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country. "What we managed to achieve as a nation has been in no small part due to the contribution of religious minorities," Bhutto Jr said.

Zoha Alvi, a researcher and one of the organisers, said she was marching today against the discrimination faced by women belonging to minorities.

"Women of minority face discrimination based on their religion and gender which makes them more vulnerable to

injustice and violence."

She added that it was essential for these women to have representation in the local, provincial and national assemblies so that they could advocate for their needs.

Concurring with Alvi, Safina Javed — another organiser — stressed the importance of reserved seats for non-Muslims in law enforcement agencies.

She pointed out that there were many pro-minority laws in Sindh, however, they only "exist on paper". Javed said officers assigned to enforce these laws were often biased and hindered the implementation of laws in "letter and spirit".

"If these departments have citizens belonging to the minority community, laws would be better implemented without bias," she suggested.

Representing the Sikh community, Patron-In-Chief of the Pakistan Sikh Council Ramesh Singh said, "Currently there is no representation of Sikh and Parsi community in any of the elected bodies due to which several of our issues go unheard."

Forced conversions and blasphemy laws were also a part of the conversation in the march as several participants carried banners with pictures of their loved ones who were in jail or missing.

Talking about the issue, Bhutto Jr asserted, "La Ikraha fid Deen, let there be no compulsion in religion. The Holy Quran states this clearly. No one should be forced into anything and I consider forced conversions to be a form of human trafficking."

Meanwhile, Javed was of the opinion that the government, on a priority basis, should address the gross misuse of the law. "The public should not become the judge and executioner."

Source: DAWN



*Ambedkar Society for South Asia*

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