

Facing discrimination, Indian Dalits convert to Buddhism

by [Bhavya Dore](#) in the [November 22, 2016](#) issue

Kanti Sarvaiya left his Hindu heritage behind and became a Buddhist.

“Hinduism has done nothing for us,” said Sarvaiya, 20, who lives in the western Indian state of Gujarat. “So our family elders have decided to convert.”

In July, upper-caste men publicly flogged a group of Dalits—formerly considered “untouchables”—in the village of Mota Samadhiyala on the suspicion of slaughtering a cow, a sacred animal in Indian religions. Some of the victims were Sarvaiya’s relatives. Fed up with Hinduism’s caste system—entrenched for centuries—he and his family want out.

Rallies across the state of Gujarat began October 11 with mass conversion ceremonies where thousands of people formally became Buddhist. Dalit groups and nonprofits organizing the series of rallies expected more than 40,000 people to have converted by the end of the year.

“More people die of caste-related violence than terrorism,” said Ashok Samrat, 35, a prominent Dalit leader in Gujarat who himself converted at a public event in 2009 and is helping organize the events. “Buddhism has shown the possibility of dignity and equality.”

There have been several incidents of violence this year. Among those, in Mumbai, a Dalit teenager was killed for romancing an upper-caste girl, and in Tamil Nadu, a Dalit man was murdered for marrying an upper-caste woman.

Lower-caste conversion to other religions—most often Buddhism—isn’t new, but it is receiving a renewed impetus in the wake of the violence.

The caste system divides people into groups; at the bottom are the Dalit. Historically, they have been denied education, consigned to menial tasks such as scavenging, and deprived of self-determination.

The Indian constitution safeguards what it calls “scheduled castes” through affirmative action policies. In theory, all citizens are equal, but in practice violence is

on the rise.

In 1956, Dalit leader and national icon Babasaheb Ambedkar, who also framed India's constitution, led a mass conversion to Buddhism in Maharashtra after unsuccessfully fighting for change within Hinduism.

Referred to as the neo-Buddhist movement, such mass conversions have taken place regularly ever since.

"We found a connection with Buddhism," said Laxman Mane, an activist and poet from Maharashtra, who converted in 2006 and then galvanized 500,000 others to do the same in a public ceremony in Mumbai in 2007. "It is a way to organize."

C. Lakshmanan, associate professor at the Madras Institute of Development Studies in Chennai, agreed, saying that Dalits are refusing to submit to age-old indignities.

"In India, conversion is a mode of protest and expressing dissatisfaction," Lakshmanan said. "It is both political and religious."

Prime Minister Modi condemned the caste atrocities during a recent television interview.

"All those who have fed this country with the poison of caste divide have destroyed the country," he said. "Are these incidents fitting of a civilized society?"

However, there is a sense among activists and community members that despite his public condemnation, caste violence has intensified since his party, the right-wing Hindu nationalist BJP, came to power in 2014.

Crimes against scheduled castes, including Dalits, increased 19 percent from 2013 to 2014, according to national crime data statistics.

"There was oppression during the previous government's rule too, but it is worse now," said Shyam Sonar, a Mumbai-based activist.

In India, Hindus constitute about 80 percent of the population, Muslims 13 percent, and Buddhists less than 1 percent, according to 2011 census data, the latest available.

The Buddhist population growth rate was 6 percent, compared with the national population growth rate of 18 percent.

The Indian constitution allows freedom of religion and the possibility of voluntary conversion. Still, Samrat said, after conversions, the district authorities in Gujarat have failed to issue conversion certificates.

If those certificates are not given, thousands will march to the state capital, Gandhinagar.

“Our demand is let us live with dignity,” he said. “We have not been allowed into the mainstream.” —Religion News Service

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