

Dalit Christians Fight for Equal Rights in India

Representatives of India's Dalit Christians are demanding that the government expedite its decision on whether they will be given the same legal rights and protection as Dalits of other faiths.

Churches and Christian institutions observed a nationwide week of fasting and prayer in late August in support of the demand.

In India's caste system, Dalits are the lowest of the lowest and considered "untouchable." Though they are entitled to "reservations," a government plan that reserves 26 percent of jobs and educational placements for Dalits, Christians have been denied those rights.

"The Dalit Christians' rights were taken away by the 1950 presidential order, which confined the rights to those practicing the Hindu faith," said charismatic leader Rev. Moses Swamidas, president of Bible Faith Mission in Tamil Nadu.

Dalits of the Sikh and Buddhist faiths won back their rights, but currently Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam are still denied them.

This discrimination against Dalit Christians was apparent during the tsunami relief operations. John Mary, a 45-year-old Dalit Christian, knocked on scores of doors for help. But being an "untouchable" Christian, she and hundreds of others

in southern Indian states were denied government relief assistance.

John Mary was one of the 573 witnesses from the southern Indian states who participated in a public tribunal in August held by the All-India Catholic Union where Dalit Christians demanded equal rights. The hearing was supported by Catholic and charismatic church leaders.

After the hearing, the tribunal determined that Dalit Christians should be given the same rights as Dalits of other faiths. The matter was to be heard before the Supreme Court in August but was handed over to the Justice Rangnath Mishra National Commission for Linguistic and Religious Minorities, an advisory panel that investigates economic and social problems among religious minorities.

John Dayal, secretary general of the All India Christian Council, said the referral was simply a delay tactic. His group is working to see a law passed that guarantees Dalit Christians equal rights.

As human rights groups work to rid Dalits of the untouchable stigma altogether, observers say a favorable response from the government would improve Dalit Christians' quality of life. "We face a terrible situation in our villages in southern India," said B.P. John, a Christian activist in Karnataka state. "Rich and upper-class families confiscate properties of lower caste converts to Christianity. Not long back two of our brothers were killed by goons of a local elected representative who sides with them. It's a war unleashed by the upper caste on us Dalit Christians."

The Supreme Court was to hear the case Oct. 18.

Joshua Newton in Madurai, India