

No Special Caste Status for Christians, Indian Minister Says

India should not extend government job and education assistance to the country's poorest Christians, India's social justice minister, Thavar Chand Gehlot, said this month.

For one thing, he said, there are no Christians among India's Dalits, a name given to the country's most impoverished and marginalized citizens, sometimes called "untouchables." For another, extending government benefits to poor Christians would encourage poor Hindu Indians to convert in hopes of qualifying for the programs.

The minister's statements, provided Oct. 10 to the Times of India, drew scoffs from activists who work with Christian Dalits. Advocates for Christian and Muslim Dalits have tried for decades to gain access to the government's job and education set-asides.

"As a Dalit Christian leader, I have to state that the position of the minister is unfortunate," Rev. Kumar Swamy, national secretary of the All India Christian Council, told *World Watch Monitor*.

"The constitution clearly states that citizens will not be discriminated on the basis of religion," Swamy said. The government's provision of benefits to Hindu Dalits on one hand, and the refusal of them to Christian and Muslim Dalits on the other, he said, is a "violation of a fundamental right equality before the law guaranteed under of the constitution."

As the Indian states of Maharashtra and Haryana were holding elections, the Times of India interviewed Gehlot, a member of the cabinet of new Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He took the

opportunity to speak out on the decades-old demand to extend "Scheduled Caste" status to the country's Dalit Christians and Muslims, thereby providing them the same access to resources provided to Indian Hindus, Sikhs and Buddhists.

Gehlot said the demand, embodied in a 10-year-old lawsuit now sitting before India's Supreme Court, is illogical. Some Hindus, he said, "converted to other religions because untouchability did not exist there. The conversion has solved the problems they faced as Hindus. So, they should not ask for SC status."

Nonsense, say Christian activists.

"Nobody can escape the Indian caste system by converting to other religions. After the conversion, they do not live in vacuum but in a casteist society itself," said Rev. Sunil Raj Philip, executive secretary of the Commission on Dalits within the National Council of Churches in India, in a statement released Oct. 21. The council represents 30 Orthodox and Protestant churches in India.

Gehlot's statement, Philip said, "is meant to fool the citizens of India pretending that casteism does not affect these religions."

"The minister is trying to cover up the fact that casteism in India is a product of Hinduism and it has spread its web to the entire social matrix of India," said Philip, pastor of the Church of South India.

The official census puts the Christian population of India at 2.3 percent, though independent estimates put the number as high as 7 percent, which equates to more than 80 million people. Millions of Christian Dalits keep their faith hidden, to avoid disqualification from Scheduled Caste categorization and the benefits it provides.

"Whether Christians or Muslims do not have caste system is not

the issue. The fact is that caste identity till today is a dominant identity in India and results in all forms of discrimination," Rev. Swamy told *World Watch Monitor*.