

Caste, Religion and Reservation (With special focus on Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians)

Caste has been interconnected with religion in a number of ways. The proposed conference focuses on two such interconnections. The first interconnection is about the origins and continuation of caste. Caste is said to have emerged within the fold of Hinduism. The Purush Sukta (Purush Hymn) in the 10th *mandal* (chapter) of the Rig Veda is often quoted to show the beginnings of the four-*varna* order. Subsequently, the four-*varnas* proliferated because of intermixture or various other reasons into numerous *jatis* inhabiting the society. Not only the genesis of the *varnas* and *jatis* is traced to the *shastras*, or the Sanskrit sacred texts, these have also been held responsible for the legitimization of the caste system leading to its continued presence. In his celebrated tract, *The Annihilation of Caste*, B.R. Ambedkar had forcefully argued about the complicity of the *shastras* in perpetuating the system of caste. He went on to propose that one could not destroy caste unless one destroyed Hinduism. There is much merit in what Ambedkar has said. However, scholars have also discovered the presence of caste among non-Hindu communities. Caste, we are told, exists among the Muslims, Christians. We know however that doctrinal Islam or Christianity does not support such social divisions. The question then is in what ways can we see the influence of Hinduism on the thoughts and practices of different castes? How far similar influences can be detected in the lives of the Dalits? Also, what has been the impact of the practice of conversion on caste relations in Indian society? Further, what kind of caste division exists among the Muslims and the Christians, and in the absence of religious sanctions what sustains such divisions among such communities?

The second interconnection between caste and religion appears in the context of the policy of reservation. The Indian constitution has reserved a certain quantum of jobs and positions on the representative bodies for the scheduled castes. Castes falling within this category are said to have suffered from various disabilities because of Hinduism. Such disabilities were considered to be specific to Hinduism. Hence, initially only the 'Hindu' castes were included in the category of the scheduled castes. Subsequently, however, even those castes professing Buddhism or Sikhism as their

faith, were included in this category. But Muslim and the Christian castes are not yet considered eligible for a similar protection. If caste and caste-based disabilities exist across religious communities, then, on what grounds does the state make a distinction between the Hindu castes on the one hand, and the Muslim and Christian castes on the other?

Some of the issues that the proposed conference would try to address are the following: the relationship between caste and religion: conceptual formulations and ethnographic instances, the role of religion in sustaining the institution of caste, the presence of caste among non-Hindu communities, the changes in the policy of reservation for scheduled castes and the assumptions behind such changes, the situation of the marginal Muslim and Christian castes and the question of their eligibility for inclusion in the category of the scheduled castes, etc.

The conference will provide a platform for dialogue between four groups which are engaged with these issues: academicians, civil society/political groups, legal experts and the agencies of the state.

The broad themes that could be taken up at the conference (though this is neither an exhaustive nor the final list) are the following:

1. Caste and Religion: Conceptual Dimensions
2. Caste and Religion: Ethnographic Instances
3. Contesting Religion, Contesting Caste
4. Reservation for the Scheduled Caste: Trajectory of Development
5. Reservation for the Scheduled Caste: Case of the Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians
6. Reservation for the Marginalized: Alternative Strategies