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Hindus aim to deny benefits to India's tribal Christians



Catholic leaders accuse groups of defying the constitution and confusing caste with religion. Right-wing Hindu groups in India have urged the federal government to bar tribal Christians from benefiting from a scheme intended for indigenous people. The groups, who started the campaign early this month and have submitted a memorandum to President Ram Nath Kovind and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, were condemned by Catholic leaders. "Caste and religion are two different things which can't be mixed. By birth we belong to a particular caste but religion is one's choice. People who are campaigning against tribal Christians are ignorant of the Indian constitution," Father Nicholas

Barla, secretary of the Indian bishops' Commission for Tribal Affairs, told UCA News.

“Article 25 of the constitution grants us the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion subject to public order, morality and health. The federal government’s scheme for tribal people is only to help them socially and economically. “Those groups don’t want tribal people to come up in their lives and indirectly try to target Christian missionaries whom they always accuse of religious conversion. Their campaign is only to disturb the peace-loving tribal people. They work to keep tribal people divided for political gain and to weaken their efforts to assert their rights.” Government benefits are important to economically deprived communities but Hindu groups believe denying social benefits to tribal Christians will be an effective way of stopping conversions.

“Being tribal is by birth but religion is choice. It is quite surprising that right-wing groups are not ready to follow what has been written in the constitution and bills passed in parliament on the scheme to help tribal people,” Ratan Tirkey, a Catholic member of the Tribes Advisory Committee of Jharkhand, told UCA News. “Stopping benefits meant for tribal Christians is challenging the constitution and Supreme Court, which clearly state that the scheme is meant for poor people and it was not given in the name of any religion. “If it is a case of religion, then what about the tribal people who have become Hindus, Muslim or follow the Sarna tribal religion? Why are only Christians targeted? It is just to harass

tribal Christian people who are considered outsiders and anti government.” Hindu groups have launched a campaign against indigenous Christians who claim benefits intended for tribal people. The campaign was reported to be active in Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha states.

The constitution guarantees social benefits such as reserved seats in government jobs and educational institutions along with education fee concessions and financial support for Dalits and tribal people to help them move to the social mainstream. However, these benefits have been denied to Christians and Muslims of Dalit origin since 1950 on grounds that these religions do not practice the caste system. Tribal Christians continue to benefit from these concessions but Hindu groups argue that tribal people lose their tribal identity upon conversion and become ineligible for these benefits. Megha Oraon, an official of the Janajati Suraksha Manch (Tribal Security Forum) in Jharkhand, said the dreams of the members of freedom movement Kartik Oraon need to be realized today.

“Maintain your religion, culture and traditions,” he urged.

“Those who are taking benefits reserved for scheduled tribes from other religions should be stopped and a law should be enacted to stop people taking advantage.” Swami Sivananda, convenor of the Tribal Security Forum in Odisha, said tribal people in Kuchinda, Rairakhol and Sambalpur are being converted to Christianity by missionaries with foreign funding. “They are Christians in practice but in government

records they are Hindus. This is hypocrisy," he said. Azad Prem Singh, who organized a protest march in Madhya Pradesh, told the media that tribal Christians "were usurping maximum reservation benefits and others were not getting their rightful share." Singh claimed conversions threaten the Hindu religion. He urged the government to stop missionaries from converting Dalit and tribal people, luring them with education and healthcare services.

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