

# Anti-Conversion Laws and Their Impact on Dalits and Adivasis: An Ambedkarite Perspective

In [India](#)  
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The question of religious conversion in India cannot be understood merely as a matter of theology or personal belief. For historically oppressed communities such as Dalits and Adivasis, conversion has often represented a path toward dignity, social mobility, and emancipation from oppressive social structures. Consequently, the emergence of anti-conversion laws in several Indian states has generated intense debate among scholars, jurists, and activists. From an Ambedkarite perspective, these laws raise profound questions about freedom of conscience, caste hierarchy, and the limits of state regulation in matters of faith.

The Indian Constitution guarantees the right to freedom of religion under Article 25, which grants every individual the freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice, and propagate religion. Yet this right is subject to limitations related to public order, morality, and health. Over time, several

Indian states have enacted laws designed to prevent religious conversions that occur through force, fraud, or inducement. While these laws are often justified as measures to protect vulnerable communities from coercion, critics argue that they disproportionately affect Dalits and Adivasis, whose historical experiences with religion and caste make conversion an important tool of social transformation.

To understand the impact of anti-conversion laws on Dalits, one must first consider the relationship between religion and caste in Indian society. Within the traditional Hindu social order, caste hierarchy has historically governed social relations, occupational roles, and access to resources. Dalits, formerly treated as “untouchables,” were placed at the bottom of this hierarchy and subjected to severe discrimination and exclusion. In this context, religious conversion became a strategy for escaping the social stigma attached to caste status.

The most influential advocate of conversion as a means of liberation was **B. R. Ambedkar**, the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and one of the most important leaders of the Dalit movement. Ambedkar argued that the caste system was deeply embedded in Hindu religious ideology and therefore could not be dismantled without a fundamental break from the religious framework that sustained it. His famous declaration— “I was born a Hindu, but I will not die a Hindu”—captured the depth of his critique.

Ambedkar ultimately fulfilled this pledge through the historic **Buddhist Conversion Movement of 1956**, when he and several hundred thousand followers embraced Buddhism. This mass conversion was not simply a spiritual transformation; it was a social and political act aimed at rejecting caste oppression and establishing a new identity grounded in equality and human dignity. From this perspective, conversion represented a collective assertion of freedom rather than an act of religious manipulation.

Many Dalits who have converted to Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, or Sikhism have done so for similar reasons. Conversion often provides an opportunity to escape the stigma of untouchability and to participate in religious communities that emphasize equality. In some cases, missionary institutions have also provided education, healthcare, and social services that were historically denied to marginalized communities. These opportunities have played an important role in the upliftment of Dalit and tribal populations, particularly in regions where state institutions were weak or inaccessible.

Anti-conversion laws complicate this dynamic by introducing legal and administrative barriers to religious change. Several states—including **Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, and Odisha**—have enacted “Freedom of

Religion” laws that require individuals seeking to convert to notify government authorities or obtain official permission. These laws typically prohibit conversions achieved through force, fraud, or inducement, and violations can result in criminal penalties.

While the stated purpose of these laws is to prevent coercion, critics argue that their implementation often restricts genuine expressions of religious freedom. For Dalits, the requirement of prior permission or official scrutiny can act as a deterrent to conversion. Social pressures within villages and communities may intensify when the process becomes visible to local authorities, leading to harassment or intimidation. In practice, the administrative procedures associated with these laws can undermine the autonomy of individuals seeking to change their religion.

Another controversial aspect of anti-conversion legislation is the broad definition of “inducement” or “allurement.” In many laws, inducement may include the offer of material benefits, educational opportunities, or social services. Because missionary organizations frequently operate schools, hospitals, and welfare programs, their activities may be interpreted as attempts to influence religious conversion. This has significant implications in tribal regions where such institutions have historically played a crucial role in community development.

For Adivasi communities, the issue of conversion has a somewhat different historical context. Many tribal societies traditionally practiced indigenous religions that were distinct from mainstream Hinduism. During the colonial and postcolonial periods, significant numbers of Adivasis adopted Christianity or other religions through sustained interaction with missionaries and social reform movements. These conversions often brought literacy, political awareness, and organizational capacity to communities that had long been marginalized.

However, anti-conversion laws can disrupt these processes by placing restrictions on missionary activity and by creating suspicion around religious change. In some tribal regions, tensions between religious communities have escalated into violence. One widely discussed example is the communal violence in **Kandhamal district**, where conflicts involving tribal Christians resulted in displacement, destruction of property, and loss of life. Such incidents illustrate how debates over conversion can intersect with broader social and political conflicts.

Another dimension of the issue concerns the persistence of caste discrimination even after conversion. Many Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam continue to face social exclusion in everyday life. Moreover, the Indian state recognizes Scheduled Caste status primarily for

those who belong to Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist communities. This policy is rooted in the **Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950**, which limits eligibility for certain affirmative action benefits. As a result, Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam may lose access to reservations in education, employment, and political representation. This creates a difficult dilemma: conversion may offer spiritual and social dignity but can also entail the loss of important legal protections.

From an Ambedkarite standpoint, anti-conversion laws are therefore seen not merely as legal regulations but as mechanisms that shape the broader structure of Indian society. By restricting the ability of marginalized communities to leave religious frameworks associated with caste hierarchy, these laws may inadvertently reinforce the very inequalities they claim to address. Ambedkar himself emphasized that freedom of conscience must include the freedom to change one's religion, particularly when religious doctrines perpetuate social injustice.

At the same time, defenders of anti-conversion laws argue that vulnerable populations must be protected from coercion and exploitation. They contend that conversion driven by economic incentives or external pressure undermines genuine religious choice. The challenge, therefore, lies in balancing the protection of individual autonomy with the prevention of coercive practices.

In conclusion, the impact of anti-conversion laws on Dalits and Adivasis reflects a complex interplay of constitutional rights, social hierarchies, and historical struggles for dignity. For many members of these communities, conversion represents a means of escaping oppressive structures and asserting a new identity based on equality. From an Ambedkarite perspective, restrictions on conversion raise fundamental questions about whether the constitutional promise of freedom of conscience can be fully realized in a society still shaped by the legacy of caste. The debate over anti-conversion laws thus continues to illuminate the broader tensions between religious freedom, social justice, and state authority in contemporary India.

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