

Indian Churches: 'Zero tolerance' for caste discrimination

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Caste discrimination, or casteism, was designated a sin and a "crime against humanity" at the Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits held in New Delhi on 22-24 October. Commitment to exercise zero tolerance for the sin of caste discrimination were given by the National Council of Churches in India (NCCI). The church looked inward in a reflective statement produced during the conference saying:

"Caste discrimination has ... robbed Dalits of their self-esteem; denied them access to places of worship and sources of water for survival; and curtailed their opportunities for education and employment... Dalit children are shunned, stunted and have their childhood shattered. Dalit women are beaten, raped, and murdered. Dalit men are dispossessed, locked up, and lynched... We are ashamed that we as Christians have remained silent while our brothers and sisters have been violated and killed."

This state of affairs has prompted the Indian churches to declare that caste discrimination must be banished from the church and appeal to all Christians to help in eradicating this sin.

The churches thus committed, "To put our energies and resources to work to end caste division... To our churches serving as zero tolerance zones for casteism and caste based discrimination and our churches developing policies on social inclusion. That also involves that our institutions become sites that practise preferential option for Dalits in admission, employment and in perspective."

The conference built on the 2009 Global Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits held in Bangkok - and the commitment from the NCCI also steps up efforts to meet the goals of the declaration set out in 2009.

"This conference is remarkable as it has for the first time enabled the Indian churches to name caste as an evil system and caste discrimination as a sin and a crime", said the Rev. Dr Deenabandhu Manchala, World Council of Churches Programme Executive for Justice and Inclusive Communities. "Equally important", he added, "it has moved from building on Dalit suffering to Dalit resistance and determination to dismantle an oppressive social order."

Dalit Resistance was exemplified when Bezwada Wilson, national convenor of Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA), a movement to eradicate manual scavenging, spoke at the conference. Over the years SKA has worked tirelessly to build up pressure on the Indian government to implement laws prohibiting the manual disposal of human excrements from dry latrines, imposed on Dalits.

Wilson explained that India does not lack determination to host Games and build metros, "but on this issue of human rights it always delays ... At least 18 times the government missed its promise in implementing a 1993 Act which penalises offenders who continue to build dry latrines or employ persons for manual scavenging. Nowhere in the 625 districts in India has the government implemented this Act."

Speakers at the conference urged the churches of India to support Dalit resistance, purge discrimination from the church, and create an inclusive environment for all Christians - Dalit or not.

Several members of the IDSN network were represented at the conference including the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights and IDSN welcomes this important commitment from the NCCI to eradicating caste discrimination.

More information:

For more information on the conference see [the World Council of Churches news piece](#).

Read the full statement given at the conference ["No one can serve Christ and caste!"](#) An affirmation of faith from the National Ecumenical Conference on Justice for Dalits, New Delhi, 22-24 October 2010.

Read the [WCC Central Committee Statement on caste-based discrimination](#).

Read about [the WCC's work in solidarity with Dalits](#).

Visit the [National Council of Churches in India](#) website.

Bezwada Wilson's (SKA) speech at the conference was highlighted in an [article in Christian today](#).