



# TRIPURA PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC FRONT (TPDF)

## RELIGIOUS MINORITIES AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY IN INDIA

Oppressed sections of society in India -the dalits, adivasis, women and minorities - continue to fight for their rights. In the early seventies and the anti-dam movements later on, social movements showed us the true face of the government of India.

In India, the overwhelming issues are caste and religion. The caste system defines the rights that people enjoy based on a system of social stratification founded on ancestry and occupation. Unless you are born a Brahmin or other upper-caste Hindu, you are a slave in India. The term Brahmin, for all practical purposes, incorporates all the Hindu upper-castes of India. The Brahmins claim that they are the "chosen people of God." Brahmins believe that whatever exists belongs to the Brahmin.

Under BJP rule, a new term - Hindutva - came into use that bundled all the peoples of India (except those of foreign faiths - Christians Muslims and Parsis) into the fold of Hinduism. A Cabinet member in the previous government led by BJP was open about it. He said that in India, either you must be a Hindu or you are subservient to Hinduism. Despite the fact that India's constitution bans the caste system, it remains the foundation of Hinduism and the Hindu supremacist system.

India's constitution ignores that India is many nations brought together only under foreign imperial rule and denies its peoples their right to self-determination as recognized under International Law.

India has a history of dealing dissenting voices with an iron hand. Human rights activists, media and journalists, judges and lawyers all continue to be constrained by the Indian government. Although the government claims to be secular, still it promotes Hindus and Hinduism in all fields of life. Religious minorities, including Christians and Muslims continue to be marginalized. A brief account of the state injustices in the civil society fabric of India would reveal the true face of this so called "Secular" government.



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CHRISTIANS: Christians in India report that they or fellow believers have faced threats, physical attacks, and jail time for sharing their faith. Baptisms, in particular, became a significant challenge for local churches. Under the anti-conversion laws, anyone who chose to become baptized was legally obligated to seek permission from the government, as well as provide them with the name of the person performing the baptism. Fearing repercussions, many new Christians did not make this outward profession of faith until after the laws were repealed.

Human-rights organizations report that more than 300,000 Christians in Nagaland have been killed by the Indian government. In addition, tens of thousands of Christians have been killed throughout the country. Priests have been killed, nuns have been raped and forced to drink their own urine, churches have been burned, Christian schools and prayer halls have been attacked. No one is ever punished for these activities.

In 2002, the Associated Press reported an attack on a Catholic church on the outskirts of Bangalore in which several people were injured. The assailants threw stones at the church, then broke in, breaking furniture and smashing windows before attacking worshippers. The February 25, 2002 issue of the Washington Times reported another church attack in which 20 people were wounded. Earlier that month, two church workers and a teenage boy were shot at while they prayed. The boy was injured. Two Christian

missionaries were beaten with iron rods while they rode their bicycles home. A Christian cemetery in Port Blair was vandalized. Indian police broke up a Christian religious festival with gunfire.

The Hindu militant Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), of which all the leaders of the BJP and its various allies and factions are members (founded in support of the Fascists in Italy), published a booklet on how to file false criminal cases against Christians and other religious minorities.

Several Indian states have passed laws forbidding anyone to convert to any religion other than Hinduism. These laws range from requiring a government fee for converting to forcing Dalits to appear before a magistrate and prove a level of education before converting. They often restrict the religious speech of minority believers as those of a certain income or education level are prohibited from discussing religious matters with uneducated, poor Dalits.

- On January 28, 2006, a group of Christians in Madhya Pradesh were engaged in prayer. A mob of Hindu militants stormed the hall, a private facility, and severely beat eight Christians.



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- On December 29, 2005 a landmine was planted in the Lengjen (Ngarichan) Committee Hall in Tamenglong District which is a Naga inhabited area in the state of Manipur. The land mine exploded when the children of the village went and played at the hall. One 12-year-old boy died in the hospital. Another boy's limb was ripped off and several others were seriously injured.

DALITS: 'Human Rights Watch' in its February 2007 Report states that India has systematically failed to uphold its international legal obligations to ensure the fundamental human rights of Dalits, or so-called untouchables, despite laws and policies against caste discrimination. The Report states that more than 165 million Dalits in India are condemned to a lifetime of abuse simply because of their caste.

On December 27, 2006 Manmohan Singh became the first sitting Indian Prime Minister to openly acknowledge the parallel between the practice of "untouchability" and the crime of apartheid. Singh described "untouchability" as a "blot on humanity" adding that "even after 60 years of constitutional and legal protection and state support, there is still social discrimination against Dalits in many parts of our country."

Even though they are officially considered Hindus, the Dalits may be the most oppressed people on Earth. The 250 million lower castes include 170 million people called the Scheduled Castes (Untouchables) and 70 million people called the Tribals (Adivasis). Both are looked upon by upper-caste Hindus as less than human and to touch a Dalit renders a person himself "Untouchable." They are called impure, they are shunned, they are banned from Hindu temples, and they are considered to be so low on India's social scale that they are outside of the caste system.

The Untouchable Dalits and Sudras (another low caste) make up 70 percent of the population of India. Most live in very impoverished conditions. At least half the population of India lives below the international poverty line. Forty percent live on less than two dollars per day.

Discrimination against Dalits includes education inequality, economic disenfranchisement, religious discrimination, a poor system of medical care, and targeted violence against women. Dalit students are often denied the opportunity to receive the public education guaranteed by the Indian constitution. Rape is widespread and massively underreported.

- On August 31, 2005, upper-caste villagers in the village of Gohana burned more than 60 Dalit residences, driving over 2,000 Dalit families out of Gohana.



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- In 1998, a judge in Allahabad cleaned the courtroom with blessed water from the Ganges River because it was previously occupied by a judicial officer belonging to a Scheduled Caste.

When Dalits are walking in the presence of a Brahmin, they can be beaten or killed with impunity. Under strict interpretation of the caste system, Dalits are obligated to perform certain manual duties for upper-caste families without compensation. These duties include cleaning latrines, skinning dead animals, and crafting leather shoes, and other menial tasks.

**SIKHS:** Sikhs are also highly victimized by the Indian government. According to Inderjit Singh Jaijee, over 250,000 Sikhs have been killed since the military attack on the Golden Temple in June 1984 (reported in his the book 'The Politics of Genocide'). The figures were compiled by the Punjab State Magistracy, which represents the judiciary of Punjab. A report issued by the 'Movement Against State Repression' (MASR) showed that India admitted to holding 52,268 political prisoners. Amnesty International reports that tens of thousands of other minorities are also being held as political prisoners. How can a democracy hold political prisoners?

Amnesty International reported last year that tens of thousands of minorities are being held as political prisoners. According to many reports, some of these political prisoners have been in custody for almost two decades. These prisoners continue to be held under a law called the "Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Act" (TADA), even after it expired in 1995. TADA empowered the government to hold people virtually indefinitely for any offence or for no offence at all.

- In June 2005, at the observance of the Indian government's 1984 military attack on the Golden Temple, a group of Sikhs demonstrated, then made speeches in support of independence for Khalistan, the Sikh homeland that declared its independence on October 7, 1987, and hoisted the Sikh flag. For this they were arrested. This followed the arrest of 35 Sikhs in January 2005, when they made speeches and raised the Khalistani flag at a Republic Day event. Some of the leaders were held for 50 days without trial.
- MASR and the 'Punjab Human Rights Organization' conducted an investigation of the March 2000 massacre of 35 Sikhs in the village of Chithisinghpura in Indian Kashmir on the eve of the visit of President Clinton to India. It concluded that Indian forces carried out the massacre. The apparent intent was to make use of the presence of the world press to blame Muslims for massacre and vilify the resistance to the occupation of the state by India. A separate investigation conducted by the International Human Rights



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Organization came to the same conclusion. So did reporter Barry Bearak of the New York Times magazine.

Recently in the state of Uttaranchal Pradesh, Sikh farmers were forced out of their farms, which were bulldozed, and they were thrown out of the state. They received no compensation and have nowhere to go to find roof over their heads or livelihood for their families. The truth is that discrimination against and oppression of minority faiths is so widespread that it draws little attention within or outside India. Although outsiders are allowed to buy land in the Punjab, Sikhs cannot buy land in neighbouring Rajasthan and Himachal Pradesh. This discriminatory policy prevents Sikh farmers from making a living. It has impoverished them forcing many to migrate overseas.

About 50,000 Sikhs were ruthlessly killed by the Punjab Police and their bodies were secretly disposed off to hide the crime. Young Sikhs were abducted, tortured and killed in Police custody. Their bodies were then declared "unidentified" and cremated incinerating all proof of the Indian State's barbarity. Countless bodies were consigned to the canals which abound in the Punjab. The secret cremation policy was exposed by human-rights activist Jaswant Singh Khalra who was arrested for publishing his report and was murdered while in police custody.

Narinder Singh, a spokesman for the Golden Temple, the seat of the Sikh religion, was interviewed in August 1997 by National Public Radio. He told his interviewer, "The Indian government, all the time they boast that they are secular, that they are democratic. But they have nothing to do with a democracy, nothing to do with secularism. They just kill Sikhs to please the majority."

**MUSLIMS:** The Indian government has killed over 300,000 Muslims in Kashmir. They have sent over 700,000 troops to suppress the people of Kashmir.

Amnesty International, in its 2006 Report stated that torture, deaths in custody and "disappearances" continue to be reported. In January, the Minister of State for Home Affairs stated that some 600 people, including 174 foreigners, were held under the Public Safety Act (PSA), a preventive detention law. In October, 44 detainees were released but new detentions were reported. Several people had been held under the PSA for over 10 years under successive PSA detention orders.

- Farooq Ahmad Dar was detained in November under his ninth consecutive PSA order. He had been in continuous detention under the PSA since 1991.



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- Civilians were repeatedly targeted by state agencies and armed groups.
- In May, armed fighters threw a grenade just as children were leaving their school in Srinagar, killing two women who had come to pick up children and injuring 50 others, including 20 pupils.
- In July, four juveniles aged between 11 and 15 were shot dead by paramilitary Rashtriya Rifles in Kupwara district. Local people said that the boys had participated in a marriage party and gone for a stroll but ran away when ordered to stop. They said that the army had been informed of possible movements of people attending the party late at night.

In September 2006, the State Human Rights Commission, which had registered 3,187 cases of human rights violations since its inception in 1991, reiterated its earlier complaint that government departments failed to implement its recommendations.

Throughout the year 2006, there were reports of abuses – including torture, attacks and killings of civilians – by armed groups in Jammu and Kashmir, the north-east and several central and eastern states where left-wing armed groups were becoming increasingly active.

- In November 2006, during elections in Bihar, Maoists (naxalites) attacked the Jehanabad prison. More than 340 prisoners, including key Maoist leaders, were freed. Eight prisoners belonging to a private army of dominant landed castes, Ranvir Sena, were killed and 20 others kidnapped.
- In Lunawade village in Panchmahal district of Kashmir, during the last week of December 2005, a mass grave was discovered. It contained the bodies of at least 26 victims of the Indian government's pogrom against the Muslims. Their crime? The Kashmiri people were promised a referendum on their status in 1948, but that vote has never been held.

In 1989, when all hope of that promise being fulfilled had evaporated, violent resistance began that is being ruthlessly crushed resorting to pogroms and genocide that has led to 100,000 resistance fighters killed so far by the Indian military.

- On February 27, 2002, a fire on a train in Godhra in Gujarat killed fifty-eight passengers, among them fifteen children. This gave rise to massacres in which 2,000 to 5,000 Muslims were murdered. According to a policeman in Gujarat who was quoted in an Indian newspaper, the government pre-planned the massacre. In an eerie parallel to the Delhi massacre of Sikhs in November 1984, the police were kept from intervening.



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In a 70-page report on the massacre, Human Rights Watch reported that not a single person has been convicted in these massacres. More than one hundred Muslims have been charged under India's much-criticized Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA) for their alleged involvement in the train massacre in Godhra. No Hindus have been charged under POTA in connection with the violence against Muslims.

**HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR:** The procrastinated armed conflict in Jammu & Kashmir has affected the entire Society. There has been no let up in the situation. The engagement of more than half a million Indian Security personnel has resulted in unprecedented massive human right violations which are continuing unabatedly.

Before the onset of conflict in Kashmir, the term Human Rights was not popularly known but, when the conflict started in the early 90's, human rights became a major issue in Kashmir and all sections of the Kashmiri society got involved in issues related to human rights. They sent memorandums to the United Nations for humanitarian intervention in Kashmir. Overnight, groups like Amnesty International became a household name. Professionals like doctors, lawyers, social activists, bureaucrats and retired judges constituted District and local level committees.

Physicians for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and other international human rights groups began reporting on human rights in Kashmir. A number of reports have been published expressing deep concern at human rights abuses committed by all sides, particularly a systematic pattern of human rights abuses and impunity by the Indian government.

But the Indian government has banned international human rights groups like Amnesty International from visiting. Even the ICRC was banned for a number of years and was only permitted limited access to officially listed prisons and Joint Interrogation centers to ensure fair and humane treatment of the thousands of imprisoned Kashmiris. ICRC operations in Kashmir are severely curtailed by a very restrictive Memorandum of Understanding with the Indian government which does not permit unfettered access, unannounced visits to detention centers, or access to the "unofficial" prisons and detention centers.

**MEDIA: FREEDOM OF PRESS AND SPEECH:** According to the estimates of "Reporters Without Borders", India ranks 120<sup>th</sup> worldwide in press freedom index.

The Indian Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the Government generally respected these rights in practice, but with some limitations. Under the Official Secrets



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Act, the Government may restrict publication of sensitive stories or suppress criticism of its policies

The 'Newspapers Incitements to Offences Act' remains in effect in Jammu and Kashmir. Under the Act, a District Magistrate may prohibit the publication of material likely to incite murder or any act of violence; however, newspapers in Srinagar regularly report in detail on alleged human rights abuses by the Government publish press releases of separatist Kashmiri groups on regular basis.

Mostly, ethnic or religious groups carry out attacks on members of the media. In June 2004, radical elements of the BJP attacked the Mumbai office of the newspaper Aapla Mahanagar, assaulted the editorial staff and damaged office equipment in response to an article written against a Hindu religious sect. In August of the same year, Hindu nationalist activists from the Shiv Sena injured the editor of the Mumbai-based Marathi daily Mahanagar in retaliation for remarks allegedly made against Shiv Sena leader Narayan Rane in a private conversation.

State violence against the press in Jammu and Kashmir causes significant self-censorship there by journalists, who are reluctant to report on events.

**TREATMENT OF JOURNALISTS/PRESS:** During 2006, two journalists were killed while doing their job. Prahlad Goala, working on a regional daily in Assam State in the north-east, was killed after he wrote articles exposing nepotism on the part of a local official. Also, in the north-east, a bureau chief escaped a murder attempt by an armed communist group. A young correspondent for a regional newspaper in Maharashtra State, central India, Arun Narayan Dekate, was stoned to death by gangsters he had named in his articles.

The authorities in Chhattisgarh State, east-central India, badly hit by a Maoist revolt, sacrificed press freedom to the fight against this new "terrorism". A security order was adopted which allowed imprisonment from one to three years, for journalists meeting Maoist rebels. A score of reporters were assaulted or threatened with death by police officers or members of local militia supposed to counter the Maoist influence. At least two correspondents on the daily *Hind Sat* were forced to give up their work for fear of reprisals.

The press did not really benefit from the Indian-Pakistani rapprochement in Kashmir. Some increasingly radical separatist groups threatened suicide attacks on local cable television operators. Fearing for their safety, some of them decided to stop broadcasting channels considered "obscene" by the armed groups. Journalists were also targeted by these same groups.





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In June, Shujaat Bukhari, correspondent in Kashmir for the national daily 'The Hindu', escaped a murder attempt by armed men. Indians security services have also been implicated in attacks against the press, as in the assault, in September, on three reporters, who were beaten by police officers in the streets of Srinagar.