
VIOLENT PROTESTS BY INDIA'S LOWEST-CASTE DALIT AGAINST LAW CHANGES LEAVE AT LEAST 7 DEAD

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At least seven people were killed when India's lowest-caste Dalits took to the streets in widespread violent protests on Monday (April 2) against changes to a law that provides them with special protection.

There were reports of clashes with police, blocked trains and roads, and vandalised property in states including Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab , Gujarat, Rajasthan and Bihar. Television footage showed images of police beating protesters and people setting fire to police posts and vehicles .

In central Madhya Pradesh state, four protesters died in clashes with police and curfew was imposed in some parts of the state.

Some states like Punjab also stopped Internet services to prevent the protests from spreading.

The Supreme Court ruled on March 20 that the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act - intended to protect Dalits and other marginalised groups - was being misused in many cases. It changed some stringent provisions, including barring immediate arrest of individuals accused of discrimination.

The court decided that police should initiate arrests only after a preliminary investigation, and approval is required from a higher authority to arrest government officials.

But Dalit organisations have argued that stripping away these provision will put members of the caste at risk of greater discrimination. They gave the call for the protests, which were also supported by many political parties and Congress

Traffic was choked in capital Delhi as protesters turned out in large numbers on Monday, even as the Indian government, in an emergency action, asked the Supreme Court to review its order and reinstate the provision for automatic arrest, among others.

Federal law minister Ravi Shankar Prasad said: "I want to say humbly that we don't agree with the Supreme Court's reasoning behind the order."

Formerly known as untouchables, the Dalits make up 17 per cent of the population and face social stigma and poverty. In many villages, they are often forced to live in one end of the village and shunned by other caste groups. They often cannot draw water directly from the common well and have separate glasses kept for them at tea shops.

But six decades of affirmative action by the government, which includes reserved places in higher education institutes and government jobs, have created a small but growing group of Dalits who have joined India's growing middle class. Many are first-generation doctors, lawyers, bureaucrats, politicians like former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Mayawati and entrepreneurs.

While Dalit activists criticised the outbreak of violence, they said that the community needs protection.

"It should not be diluted. If people are misusing the act, punish them," said Ms Nirjhari Sinha, convenor of the Jan Sangharsh Manch, a civil rights organisation which supported the protests

"Everywhere there is discrimination. Even if Dalits are working in offices, they don't get invited for a cup of tea. There is no intermingling and marriage (with a Dalit) is a far thing. There is unemployment and now some are turning to violence."

The protests also come at a time when right-wing cow vigilantes groups have become increasingly active since the BJP - which is rooted in Hindu nationalism - came to federal power. The cow vigilante groups have targeted members of the Dalit community who are involved in the leather business.

Dalit writer and activist Chandra Bhan Prasad also noted that the growth of the Dalit middle class has led to greater caste tension and hence a greater need for keeping the law intact.

"Today, more and more Dalits are becoming freer (because of) industrial expansion and urbanisation, hence attracting more attacks from caste supremacists," said Mr Prasad.

"This Act needs more teeth as Dalits are rising every moment, and the casteist Hindu society is feeling unsettled."

<http://www.straitstimes.com/asia/south-asia/violent-protests-by-indias-low-caste-dalit-against-law-changes-leave-at-least-7-dead>

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