

Untouchables caste off creed for better deal

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THOUSANDS of low-caste Hindus converted to Buddhism and Christianity in central India yesterday to free themselves from the discriminatory caste system and to protest against new anti-conversion laws. The ceremonies took place in central India's largest city of Nagpur to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the conversion to Buddhism of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a low-caste Hindu and the founder of India's democratic constitution.

Buddhist monks and Christian priests administered religious vows in separate ceremonies to about 10,000 Dalits, the politically correct name for the people once called "untouchables".

Several states governed by the ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have introduced or strengthened laws to stop what it says are forced conversions, mainly by Christian missionaries.

Most of those who converted today in one of the biggest inter-faith changes in years were poor villagers from the state of Maharashtra. "You are no more a Hindu. Say you will not worship any Hindu god or goddess. Say I will never go to a temple," a Buddhist monk asked the crowd to repeat with him.

While more than 9000 people converted to Buddhism chanting Buddhist mantras, more than 500 others embraced Christianity by taking baptismal dips in a makeshift pool.

There are an estimated 180million Dalits in India. Traditionally compelled to perform the most menial, degrading and dangerous tasks, Dalits occupy the bottom rung of the caste ladder, at the opposite end of the social spectrum to the Brahmins, who constitute less than 5 per cent of the population. The mass conversion comes at a politically sensitive time as minority religious groups fear Hindu extremists are becoming increasingly antagonistic towards them.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in the western state of Gujarat caused an outcry last month by amending an anti-conversion law to classify Buddhism and Jainism as branches of the Hindu religion, denying them status as unique religions.

Five other BJP-led states, including Rajasthan, Orissa and Madhya Pradesh, have introduced or strengthened anti-conversion laws, which local leaders say are designed to protect low-caste, often illiterate, Hindus from being put under pressure to convert.

Critics say they are chiefly designed to keep them within the caste system. "There is complete freedom in the constitution to pick up and follow any faith you chose," said Joseph D'Souza, president of the All India Christian Council. (Source: <http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20587641-2703,00.html>)