

Interview: Author Suraj Yengde on SC status for Christian and Muslim Dalits

Suraj Yengde speaks to TNM on the anti-caste movements in India, Dravidian identity politics, and the ongoing demand for Scheduled Caste status for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.



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Written by Bharathy Singaravel [Follow @KuthaliPu](#)

As an academic, author, human rights and anti-caste activist, Suraj Yengde is a well-known figure in the Ambedkarite and anti-racism movements. He was a Senior Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School and a research associate at the African and African American Studies department at Harvard University, and is currently a DPhil candidate at Oxford University and a Du Bois Fellow at Harvard University. He is also the author of non-fiction book *Caste Matters*, co-editor of *The Radical in Ambedkar*, and a regular contributor to the Indian Express where he writes a column called *Dalitality*.

Suraj recently spoke at Chennai's Anna Centenary Library on the topic of 'Envisaging Inclusive State Socialism' at an event called TN Talks, organised by the Tamil Nadu state government. TNM caught up with Suraj after his talk to discuss pressing questions on the anti-caste movements in India, Dravidian identity politics, and the ongoing demand for Scheduled Caste (SC) status for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in India.

You just spoke on the works of Iyothee Thass Pandithar, Dr Ambedkar, and Periyar (at the TN Talks event). Do you see similarities in discourses in the anti-caste movement in Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu?

Both are very radical. In fact, in modern India, three states come out strongly in their anti-caste politics – Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab. This is because of the kind of legends that have come out of these three states. There are leaders such as Iyothee Thass, Rettamalai Sreenivasan, Periyar, and MC Raja in Tamil Nadu. In Maharashtra, you had Ambedkar, Phule, King Shahu as figure heads. There were also Sikh radicals such as Mangu Ram Mugowalia and Kanshiram joining the Ad-Dharmi movement in Punjab.

Do you also see a divergence between these movements?

In both Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, the Shudras were the holders of the narrative. The Shudras felt the brunt of Brahmin dominance, so they argued loudly against it. People like Periyar or Phule were also from the Shudra communities, but they realised that they cannot bring about social change without reform. That's why their contribution is extraordinary.

I wouldn't say there is much divergence between the movements. Tamil Nadu took on a Backward Class (BC) politics, though the provenance of the Dravidian politics was by nature Scheduled Caste politics. The movement eventually became confined to Tamil nationalistic ethos, which was important for people. But the people needed more than a regional imagination.

In Maharashtra, similarly, the Satyashodhak movement's custodians became the OBC [Other Backward Classes], not unlike certain BC castes such as Gounders, Vanniyars, or Thevars in Tamil Nadu. The icons of anti-caste movement from SC communities are not advertised as much in Tamil Nadu owing to the settled casteist anxiety.

In that sense, would you agree that there have also been historical failures in the Dravidian movement? You spoke earlier today on the shared experiences of Adivasis, Dalits, and Shudras against Brahmanical hegemony. While that cannot be denied, a handful of Shudra castes, particularly in Tamil Nadu, are also the

perpetrators of caste atrocities.

You cannot say that the movement has failed. The objectives of a movement are long-term. We cannot discard it as a failure. Yes, it has not sufficiently addressed the cultural phenomenon of caste. If you only submit to the political position of acquiring power, what about the rest of the facets? What about the philosophical foundation of the movement? Certainly the Dravidian movement is powerful and it needs more strength, but unless it becomes pro-Dalit, unless it centres Dalit and Adivasi perspectives, it will be suicidal. A new, more challenging, and proactive Dalit leadership should enter the movement.

After all, Dravida as a historically linguistic concept is pan-Indian and Dalits are a main theme in that story.

You had recently written in your column against the SC status for Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims, but there is also an argument that casteism exists within these supposedly egalitarian religions.

I did not write against their SC status.

Are you being misrepresented, then? What is your position on this actually?

I am always being misrepresented. People want a Dalit to be a toy – they want a ‘pariah’ or toilet cleaner Dalit. They don’t want a Dalit like Suraj Yengde. They’re afraid because we have that radically beautiful imagination. Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are our brothers and sisters. They just changed their religion, that’s all. How would I deny them their rights? They definitely need protection and support.

But for an SC status, there needs to be a Constitutional provision. It’s going to be challenged in the court. We have to realise that the people lobbying for this reservation are mostly OBCs. The Dalit Muslim politics is OBC-led. It’s not Dalit-led politics. Perhaps they want to rid the Dalits from the insufficient minority quota and other institutional benefits.

But there is a petition in the Supreme Court seeking religion-neutral reservation, filed by Franklin Caesar, who himself is Dalit Christian.

I am talking about Dalit Muslims. When it comes to Dalit Christians, they have been assimilated. In the southern coastal belt of India, there are strong religious notions. They [the missionaries] came with the liberation of a theological pursuit, but they did not tell them who their liberator is, which divorced the Dalit Christian liberation model from the Indian model. So there was a hatred against Hinduism that was natural for the outcastes to pursue.

But that does not mean one should forget their ancestral indigenous roots. We are natives, we exist without Hinduism. There is Maariamamma in Tamil Nadu. Similarly we have Mariaai in Maharashtra. That’s an example of our ancestral faith, and it’s not Hinduism. Hinduism is just a fragment of history. We were Buddhists at one time, and Buddhism is a strong foundation of our identity. But churches and mosques told Dalits that all of their ancestral faith is Hinduism. It worked in the construction of a religio-citizenship that had marked identities based on prescribed faiths.

The theological question here is different from the sociological question. In the social question, yes, with what I’ve read so far it adduces that Christian and Muslim Dalits suffer discrimination. But theologically they don’t. Their doctrines do not allow the practice of untouchability, while Brahminical Hinduism by default does.

Within this Hindu Rashtra, the Union government may even give SC status to Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims. Caste politics will become religious politics. They want to create more token representation among Muslims, Christians, and Scheduled Castes.

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We have to be clear about what our identity is, because reservation is given to that identity. That identity comes from a certain history. This doesn’t mean that if you’re not an SC Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist, your history is not coming from the Dalit experience. Irrespective of religion, Dalits remain victims of the system.

However, there is a difference between Dalit converts of four to five generations and those who converted recently. Dalits whose ancestors went to the Christian religion in colonial times provided them with an alternative and advancement. They have been able to negate their caste identity and uphold their religious identity. The caste question only came when other communities discriminated against them, which led to questions about representation in the church, like becoming a cardinal or a bishop.

Likewise, the Muslim question has been about power, capital, and invasions spanning 700 years. The outcast question of Muslims has to be seen in this direction of history. Were they mistreated since their arrival to Islam or did it happen gradually? What happened to their caste identity? Did the assertion of Dalit Muslim identity happen more recently in light of the rise of SC politics?

The question is fraught with multidimensional concerns of religion against caste. SC status has to be on the basis of caste or religion. The Hindu part of the community is trying to make it a religious issue. What kind of caste identity do you hold on to? If you hold on to the SC identity, what is the basis of it? If you hold on to religious identity, what is the basis of it?

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The Union government wants to make the identity of caste on the basis of religion only, so that there is a Hindu majority which goes against the Dalit movement. Dalits are moving away from Hinduism, but they are not going back to Christianity or Islam because they see these religions as foreign. One may believe in the poor man Jesus Christ or the liberator Mohammad, but that still comes with the questionable presence of the Dalit identity. How are you Dalit in the Christian theology? How are you Dalit in the Islamic brotherhood? You are not. Fellow non-Dalit converts have maligned you.

When it comes down to a court's decision of 'yes or no', what is it that you hope the decision would be?

Courts don't often simply rule 'yes' or 'no'. Yes or no would be very difficult. The issue comes with many conditions. If Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims have to be recognised as SC, they have to rethink their own identity. Are you going to remain within a religious category while adhering to a caste identity, is a confusing question. Christian Dalits have had access to minority status through Christian institutions. Dr Ambedkar himself was a minority advocate. But when the fight for a separate electorate was being waged, Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims were not part of the struggle. Now of course, we cannot punish our Dalit Christian and Dalit Muslim brethren for the mistakes of the past.

The Dalit Christians had a separate Christian sub-electorate. As did the Sikhs. There is a notion of indigeneity and non-indigeneity, which is going to create a lot of division within the politics of a progressive, social justice agenda. It is true that Dalits need to be recognised as SC or BC – the categories they belong to. But can Christian and Muslim Dalits claim the advantage and certificate of Scheduled Caste? Of the benefit of reservation? These are questions that need to be empirically answered.

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We can cite a few examples of discrimination, but the majority of Indian Christians – 83% approximately – are Dalit. You can see their progress. This does not apply to the recent converts of one or two generations, who are certainly living in poverty. They cannot be equated with the older converts. That is the difference I am trying to point out. The SC status has now become about the privileges or disadvantages you carry. Those from the older set of converts who have had access to good English-language education, and access to world culture that gives them doctrinal comfort, need to be compared to more recent converts. The older converts don't identify themselves as Dalit.

Perhaps those fighting in the courts come from the second category of converts who have held on to both their religious and Dalit identity, but why are we forgetting that they already have reservation? They don't have reservation as SC, but they have reservation in the OBC category.

As a counter to that, reservation is about representation not economic mobility. Secondly, when atrocities against Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are committed, they do not have the protection of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act.

Correct. So do we need to expand the scope of the Act? Many people are arguing that we need to bring OBC as a category into the Act. That is going to cause more problems. We do need an exclusive protection mechanism. But what we are trying to do is create a religious category when there is a caste category. Many are also arguing, rightfully, that Sikh and Buddhist Dalits who are not Hindu have been included, so why should we not include Christian or Muslim Dalits in the SC category? That is a great argument. If we want to treat every religion equally, remove Dalit Buddhists and Dalit Sikhs as well. We have to make a concentrated effort to think about what religion it is that we want to move towards.

If SC status is given to Dalit Christians, and I suspect that the state might do so, Christians who already claim minority status will have the additional protection of caste – which is then minority + caste. We have to consider how the broader consensus of a dominating caste Christian is formed in this, because the dominant caste may then create a much more invasive politics around the Church in terms of recognition and representation.

The difficulty for many people to accept the Dalit Christians into the SC category is that there is not enough work done to create a more harmonious relationship. When you come as a Christian, it is seen as foreign, or if you come as a Muslim, it brings in the Muslim invasion question. But if you come as a Dalit by appropriating the indigenous icons, then there is a way. That has to be a cultural work.

The court can give a decision, and of course Christian and Muslim Dalits need to be protected against the atrocities and violence against them. But we also cannot take it for granted that the scale of atrocities is comparable because we don't have data. The question right now is, how do we liberalise the Prevention of Atrocities (PoA) Act to consider Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims.

We should have identical protections on the lines of PoA Act for Dalits in non-SC category so they can take up the cases against fellow religionists.

If you say Christian and Muslim Dalits should be protected, wouldn't the easiest way be by including them in the SC category, so that they have the protection of the PoA Act?

If we do that, we're entering the domain of distribution and welfare accorded to the historically marginalised. What will we do with the existing SC population? There is already a 15% reservation. When you add the population of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims, what is the redistribution going to look like? It is going to create infighting, because the independence of Christian and Muslim Dalits as a separate caste category has already been established. Their separate caste category is among themselves. It's not for outsiders. On the other hand, Hinduism itself is based on caste categories.

For Christian and Muslim Dalits, their primary identity is not Dalit. Their primary identity is either the Christian denomination they belong to or Muslim. Not the caste specific Christian or Muslim – say Shudra, Kshatriya, or sub-caste Muslims or Christians. Otherwise, the theology will need to be reinterpreted and examined to bring in these discourses. I believe one can do that.

If they are given SC status, they will create a sub-category among Dalits and Muslims. This issue requires an elaborate solution, which cannot be reduced to a yes or no for SC status. It cannot be rushed into.

The same happened with Malas v Madigas [in Karnataka], Paraiyars v Arunthathiyars [in Tamil Nadu], or even with the Thevar sub-castes fighting for OBC status. We have to look at how this politics is going to play out in the future.

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