

The Distortion of Ziran: A Comparative Study of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims Against State-Enforced Hierarchies

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Abstract: This article examines the paradoxical condition of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in India, who face a unique form of structural violence that this study conceptualizes as the "distortion of ziran"-a term borrowed from classical Daoist philosophy denoting spontaneous, authentic selfhood. Drawing on constitutional analysis, judicial rulings, empirical data from the Pew Research Centre (2021), and ethnographic evidence, the article argues that the Presidential Order of 1950 creates a juridical paradox wherein religious conversion to Christianity or Islam results in the simultaneous retention of caste-based social discrimination and the loss of constitutional protections against it. Through comparative analysis of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims, the study demonstrates how state-enforced hierarchies operate through the intersection of religion and caste, producing a condition of "doubled marginalization" for converts. The findings indicate that both communities experience significant caste-based discrimination within their religious communities, including separate places of worship, prohibition of inter-caste marriage, and segregated burial grounds, yet remain excluded from Scheduled Caste benefits. The article concludes by arguing for the decoupling of constitutional protection from religious identity, proposing a framework of "secular caste recognition" that would extend affirmative action benefits to all Dalits regardless of religious affiliation, thereby restoring the authentic selfhood (ziran) that state-enforced hierarchies systematically distort.

Keywords: Dalit Christians, Dalit Muslims, caste, ziran, reservation policy, constitutional exclusion, double discrimination, secularism

Introduction

On March 24, 2026, a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court of India ruled in *Chinthada Anand v. State of Andhra Pradesh* that a person cannot simultaneously profess a religion other than Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism and claim membership in a Scheduled Caste (*Chinthada Anand v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, 2026). The petitioner, a Christian pastor born into the Madiga community-a recognized Scheduled Caste in Andhra Pradesh-had sought protection under the Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act after being assaulted with caste-based slurs. The court upheld the lower court's ruling quashing his complaint, finding that his conversion to Christianity resulted in the automatic loss of his Scheduled Caste status (*Chinthada Anand v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, 2026)..

This ruling was not an outlier but rather the latest iteration of a constitutional anomaly that has persisted since 1950. Paragraph 3 of the Presidential Order of August 10, 1950, explicitly states: "No person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed a member of the Scheduled Caste" (Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950). Although amended twice-in 1956 to include Sikh Dalits and in 1990 to include Buddhist Dalits-the Order has never been extended to Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007; Venkatesan, 2026). The consequence is a juridical paradox of profound proportions: caste-based social discrimination persists across religious boundaries, yet constitutional protections against such discrimination are contingent upon religious identity (Joyal, 2006).

This paradox constitutes what this article theorizes as the "distortion of *ziran*." The classical Daoist concept of *ziran*-literally "self-so" or "spontaneous nature"-denotes the authentic, uncoerced expression of one's inherent selfhood, a state of being that emerges when external impositions do not distort one's natural development (Laozi, *Daodejing*, Chapter 25; see also Ames, 1994; Hall & Ames, 1998). Applied to the Indian context, the distortion of *ziran* refers to the structural violence through which state-enforced hierarchies systematically deny Dalit converts to Christianity and Islam the ability to live authentically-forcing them to choose between religious freedom (Article 25 of the Constitution) and protection from caste-based discrimination (Articles 15 and 16) (The Constitution of India, 1950).

This article pursues three interconnected objectives. First, it provides a comparative analysis of the socio-legal condition of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims, examining how both communities experience "double discrimination": communal discrimination based on religious identity and caste-based discrimination from within their own religious communities (Azam, 2018; Ilaiah, 2006; Jodhka, 2012). Second, it analyzes the constitutional and judicial architecture that produces this exclusion, tracing the legal history from the 1950 Presidential Order through the 2024 Supreme Court ruling to the 2026 *Chinthada Anand* decision (Venkatesan, 2026). Third, it proposes a conceptual framework-"secular caste recognition"-as a path toward restoring the *ziran* that state-enforced hierarchies systematically distort.

The article proceeds as follows. Section two outlines the theoretical framework, elaborating the concept of *ziran* and its applicability to the Indian caste context. Section three examines the constitutional architecture of exclusion, analyzing the 1950 Presidential Order and subsequent judicial interpretations. Section four presents empirical evidence of caste persistence among Indian Christians and Muslims, drawing on Pew Research Centre data (2021) and ethnographic studies (TheQuint, 2021). Section five provides a comparative analysis of Dalit Christian and Dalit Muslim experiences, identifying points of convergence and divergence. Section six examines resistance movements and legal challenges, including the work of the National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC) and the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz (Anwar, 2001; Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014; ThePrint, 2024). Section seven proposes the framework of secular caste recognition, and section eight concludes.

Theoretical Framework: *Ziran*, Authentic Selfhood, and Structural Violence

2.1 The Concept of *Ziran* in Comparative Perspective

The Daoist concept of *ziran* occupies a central place in classical Chinese philosophy, particularly in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*. Unlike the Western notion of "freedom" as the absence of external constraint, *ziran* denotes the spontaneous, self-generating expression of one's inherent nature-a state of being that emerges when one acts without artificial imposition or coercive interference (Ames, 1994, p. 38). As Hall and Ames (1998) explain, "*ziran* is literally 'self-ordering' or 'self-so-ing'-the condition of being what one is in the absence of external determination" (p. 54).

The political implications of *ziran* are profound. When state structures impose arbitrary categories that contradict lived reality, they produce what the *Zhuangzi* calls *wei* -artifice or falsification-distorting the authentic selfhood of those subjected to such impositions.

The *Zhuangzi* (Chapter 8) critiques "the sage's benevolence and the ruler's righteousness" as forms of constraint that "shackle the genuine nature of people" (Watson, 1968, p. 105). Applied to the Indian context, the constitutional exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims from Scheduled Caste benefits represents precisely such a distortion: it imposes a juridical category (the non-Hindu convert who has supposedly transcended caste) that contradicts the lived reality (the Dalit convert who continues to experience caste-based discrimination).

2.2 Caste as a Pan-Indian Social Institution

The theoretical foundation of this article rests on a fundamental claim: caste is not an exclusively Hindu institution but rather a pan-Indian social phenomenon that transcends religious boundaries. As Niraja Gopal Jayal (2006) observes, "not all Christians are outside the pale of caste prejudices (dalit Christians), and not all Muslims in India constitute a monolithic, homogeneous category" (p. 30). Similarly, P. S. Krishnan, former chairman of the Backward Classes Commission, has argued that "caste is a pan-Indian rather than simply a Hindu institution" (as cited in Jayal, 2006, p. 31).

This claim is supported by extensive empirical evidence. The National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities (NCRLM), chaired by Justice Ranganath Mishra, concluded in its 2007 report: "Caste is a social phenomenon shared by every Indian community, irrespective of their religious beliefs. Caste practice is found in different religious communities, facing similar social hindrances and mistreatment by co-religionists as well as others" (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007, p. 45). The Commission further recommended that Scheduled Caste status should be completely de-linked from religion and made fully religion-neutral—a recommendation that has never been implemented (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

2.3 Double Discrimination and the Distortion of *Ziran*

The concept of "double discrimination" has emerged in scholarly literature to describe the condition of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims (Azam, 2018; Ilaiah, 2006; Jodhka, 2012). As one analyst notes, "Dalit people belonging to Abrahamic faiths face a dual burden: communal discrimination on account of their religious identity and caste-based discrimination from within their own religious communities" (Jodhka, 2012, p. 78). This double discrimination constitutes precisely the distortion of *ziran*: Dalit converts are denied the authentic expression of their religious identity (through the threat of losing constitutional protections) while simultaneously denied protection from the caste-based discrimination that continues to shape their social reality.

The material consequences of this distortion are severe. Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims are excluded from educational scholarships, government employment quotas, reserved seats in legislatures, and protection under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007; Venkatesan, 2026). As the Gopal Singh Panel reported in 1983: "The Christians and the neo-Buddhists need the same kind of concessions for their converts from the Scheduled Castes as are offered to the Hindus and Sikhs. They too suffer from the same economic handicaps, social neglect and isolation as the Hindu Scheduled Castes" (Government of India, Panel on Minorities, 1983, p. 62). Yet four decades later, the exclusion remains.

The Constitutional Architecture of Exclusion

3.1 The Presidential Order of 1950: Origins and Intent

The constitutional exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims originates in Article 341 of the Indian Constitution, which empowers the President to specify the castes, races, or tribes to be deemed Scheduled Castes (The Constitution of India, 1950). Exercising this power, President Rajendra Prasad issued the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order on August 10, 1950. Paragraph 3 of the Order states: "No person who professes a religion different from Hinduism shall be deemed a member of the Scheduled Caste" (Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950).

The rationale for this exclusion, as articulated by the courts, is that religions such as Islam and Christianity teach the "principle of equality" and do not recognize caste. Therefore, a converted Dalit

would not face the same discrimination in their newly embraced faith (*Chinthada Anand v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, 2026; Venkatesan, 2026). This reasoning is flawed on multiple grounds. First, it assumes that conversion produces an absolute material and ideational break from past social structures—an assumption contradicted by extensive empirical evidence (Jodhka, 2012; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). Second, it ignores the persistence of caste-based discrimination within Christian and Muslim communities in India (Azam, 2018; Ilaiah, 2006). Third, it creates a perverse incentive structure wherein Dalits who convert to Islam or Christianity lose constitutional protections, while those who convert to Buddhism or Sikhism retain them—a distinction that has no principled basis (Jayal, 2006; Venkatesan, 2026).

3.2 The Expansion to Sikhs and Buddhists: A Telling Exception

The 1950 Order has been amended twice: in 1956 to include Sikh Dalits and in 1990 to include Buddhist Dalits (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007; Venkatesan, 2026). These amendments reveal the arbitrary nature of the religious restriction. As critics have noted, Sikhism and Buddhism also preach the "principle of equality" and do not recognize caste in their doctrinal formulations. Indeed, Sikhism explicitly rejects caste discrimination, and Buddhism emerged historically as a critique of Brahmanical hierarchy. Yet the state has extended Scheduled Caste benefits to Sikh and Buddhist Dalits while denying them to Christian and Muslim Dalits (Jayal, 2006; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

The distinction, as one analyst observes, reflects a pattern of favoring "indigenous" religions (Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism) that were legally assimilated into "Hinduism" while rejecting religions of "foreign" origin (Christianity and Islam) (Jodhka, 2012, p. 94). This distinction has clear political dimensions, serving to maintain Hindu demographic majority and to construct Christians and Muslims as politically useful "others" (Azam, 2018).

3.3 Judicial Affirmation of Exclusion

The Supreme Court has consistently affirmed the religious restriction on Scheduled Caste status. In November 2024, the Supreme Court clarified that reservation benefits for Dalits are available only to Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs, not to those belonging to other religions (Venkatesan, 2026). The April 2025 ruling by the Supreme Court of Andhra Pradesh held that members of Scheduled Castes who convert to Christianity cannot invoke reservation provisions because "the caste system is alien to the Christian faith" (as cited in Venkatesan, 2026). And the March 2026 ruling in *Chinthada Anand* reaffirmed that a person cannot simultaneously profess a religion other than Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism and claim membership in a Scheduled Caste (*Chinthada Anand v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, 2026).

These rulings have been strongly criticized by Christian and Muslim leaders. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) described the *Chinthada Anand* ruling as "very much misleading to the general public," noting that it concerns an individual case and does not address the pending constitutional challenge to the 1950 Order (Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014, para. 4). Father Bijoy Kumar Nayak, secretary of the CBCI Commission for Dalits, emphasized that "we have been fighting for the last 75 years for the constitutional rights that were denied by the presidential order of 1950" (as cited in ZENIT News Agency, 2014, para. 6).

3.4 Constitutional Violations: Articles 14, 15, 16, 21, and 25

The exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims from Scheduled Caste benefits violates multiple fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution. All-India Catholic Union (AICU) has challenged the Order for violating equality before law (Article 14), non-discrimination (Article 15), equal opportunity in public employment (Article 16), personal liberty (Article 21), and religious freedom (Article 25) (ZENIT News Agency, 2014).

Article 15(1) explicitly states: "The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth, or any of them" (The Constitution of India, 1950, art. 15(1)). Yet the 1950 Order discriminates explicitly on the ground of religion, excluding Christians and

Muslims while including Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists. As the NCRLM concluded in 2007, the non-inclusion of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians in the Scheduled Castes list "amounts to discrimination on the basis of religion" (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007, p. 112).

Furthermore, the exclusion operates as what Jayal (2006) calls a "destructive synergy" between social disadvantage and constitutional exclusion: "The progressive civic ideals embodied in the constitution have been challenged by exclusions based on social and economic inequality, and sometimes also, paradoxically, undermined by its own policies of inclusion" (p. 31).

Empirical Evidence: The Persistence of Caste Among Christians and Muslims

4.1 Quantitative Evidence from Pew Research Centre Data

The claim that caste does not exist among Christians and Muslims in India is empirically falsifiable. Analysis of the Pew Research Centre's India dataset (2021) provides compelling evidence to the contrary (TheQuint, 2021). When respondents across religious groups were asked whether their religion recognizes the caste system, only 0.47% of Muslims and 0.59% of Christians responded that their religion does not recognize caste—figures barely higher than the 0.034% of Hindus who made the same claim (Pew Research Centre, 2021, as cited in TheQuint, 2021). Not a single Buddhist respondent reported that their religion is free from caste (Pew Research Centre, 2021, as cited in TheQuint, 2021). These findings challenge the assumption that caste is absent in non-Indic religions.

State-level data reinforce this conclusion. Among the 25 states and Union Territories for which Muslim data are available, only four states (Rajasthan at 4.03%, Madhya Pradesh at 3.33%, Assam at 4.83%, and West Bengal at 0.44%) show any noticeable proportion of Muslims asserting that their religion does not recognize caste (Pew Research Centre, 2021). In all other regions, this proportion is effectively zero, indicating that nearly all surveyed Muslims locate themselves within caste categories such as General, SC, ST, OBC, or MBC (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

4.2 Resistance to Inter-Caste Marriage

Tables 1 and 2 below present data on resistance to inter-caste marriage across both Indic and Abrahamic religions, based on the author's calculations from Pew Research Centre data (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

Table 1: Percentage of respondents discouraging inter-caste marriage for women across groups

Religion	General	SCs	STs	OBCs	MBCs
Hindu	78.64	77.42	83.84	82.13	69.3
Islam	79.29	88.81	89.40	85.30	78.82
Christian	59.81	59.00	68.00	47.89	23.52
Sikh	81.48	81.78	86.95	80.00	33.33
Buddhism	54.50	66.45	53.57	38.46	20.00

Source: Author's calculations from Pew Research Centre India dataset (2021)

Table 2: Percentage of respondents discouraging inter-caste marriage for men across groups

Religion	General	SCs	STs	OBCs	MBCs
Hindu	77.46	76.58	81.68	81.49	68.82
Islam	76.55	87.57	86.75	82.34	78.82
Christian	58.44	58.62	64.98	48.73	29.41
Sikh	81.85	80.97	95.65	82.85	66.60
Buddhism	45.40	67.90	55.35	53.84	15.00

Source: Author's calculations from Pew Research Centre India dataset (2021)

The data reveal remarkably high resistance to inter-caste marriage among Muslims-in some cases higher than among Hindus. Among Scheduled Caste Muslims, 88.81% discourage inter-caste marriage for women, compared to 77.42% among Scheduled Caste Hindus (Pew Research Centre, 2021). Among Scheduled Tribe Muslims, the figure rises to 89.40%. Resistance among Christians is somewhat lower but remains substantial: 59% of Scheduled Caste Christians discourage inter-caste marriage for women, and 58.62% for men (Pew Research Centre, 2021).

These findings have significant theoretical implications. The high resistance to inter-caste marriage among Muslims is particularly noteworthy given Islamic doctrinal commitments to equality. As scholars have documented, the concept of *kafa'ah* (compatibility) in South Asian Islamic jurisprudence has been interpreted to incorporate caste or lineage (*nasab*), lending religious justification to restrictions on inter-caste marriages (Azam, 2018; Ilaiah, 2006). Prominent scholars across denominations-including Ahmed Raza Khan (Barelvi), Ashraf Ali Thanvi and Qasim Nanautvi (Deobandi), as well as Salafi and Shia scholars-have in varying degrees discouraged inter-caste marriages on these grounds (Anwar, 2001; Ilaiah, 2006).

4.3 Qualitative Evidence: Caste Discrimination in Religious Practice

Quantitative data are supported by extensive qualitative evidence documenting caste-based discrimination within Christian and Muslim communities. A 2008 study commissioned by the National Commission of Minorities documented five forms of caste-based social discrimination among Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians: the practice of untouchability; enforced ban on inter-marriage; occupational segregation; social and cultural segregation; and economic discrimination (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). The most common manifestations included separate mosques or churches (or hierarchically segregated seating), separate burial grounds, strict prohibition on inter-marriage with severe punishments (sometimes extending to murder) for breaking this taboo, and general avoidance of social interaction and cooperation (Jodhka, 2012; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

Within Indian Christianity, caste discrimination manifests in separate churches, sitting places, communion cups, and burial grounds for Dalit and non-Dalit Christians (Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014; ZENIT News Agency, 2014). As Cardinal S. Lourdasamy observed, "Dalits of all religions are living together. They are also equally undergoing all the disabilities-social, educational, and economic due to the traditional practices of untouchability" (as cited in ZENIT News Agency, 2014, para. 8). The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India has acknowledged that "conversion to Christianity does not change the caste system, caste-mindedness, or caste consciousness" (Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014, para. 5).

Within Indian Islam, caste hierarchies are structured through the distinction between *Ashrafs* (those claiming foreign descent) and *Ajlafs* (converts from lower Hindu castes), with the *Arzal* (derived from *arzdasht*, meaning "those who are fallen") occupying the position analogous to untouchables (Azam, 2018; Ilaiah, 2006). As Ali Anwar, who popularized the term "Pasmanda Muslim" in the 1990s, has documented, caste-based discrimination among Muslims in Bihar pervades both religious and social spheres (Anwar, 2001). His work, as Kancha Ilaiah observed, "could pave the way for Pasmanda intellectuals joining hands with Phule-Ambedkarite movements across India" (Ilaiah,

2006, p. 98).

4.4 The Kerala Case Study: Kevin Joseph and the JB Koshy Commission

The case of Kevin Joseph, a 23-year-old Dalit Christian from Kottayam, Kerala, murdered in May 2018 for loving a Catholic woman from an upper caste, illustrates the deadly consequences of caste discrimination within Christianity (Government of Kerala, 2023; The New Indian Express, 2026). The

Principal Sessions Court stated that the motive behind the murder was "caste prejudice" (as cited in Government of Kerala, 2023, p. 45). Kevin's father, Joseph, told reporters years after his son's murder: "It was caste hatred" (as cited in The New Indian Express, 2026, para. 12).

The JB Koshy Commission report, submitted in 2023 and released in February 2026, officially acknowledged the contradiction faced by Dalit Christians in Kerala (Government of Kerala, 2023). The report notes that Dalit Christians often fare worse socio-economically than Scheduled Castes who have not converted, and identifies a "reconversion paradox": State benefits are restored if individuals return to Hinduism, an implicit admission that caste identity persists beyond religious change (Government of Kerala, 2023, p. 67). Denying support based on faith, the commission argues, amounts to administrative injustice (Government of Kerala, 2023).

The commission received numerous representations from Dalit Christians detailing their continued social disadvantage. Justice (retd) JB Koshy stated: "As long as this is the law, nothing can change unless it is amended. Our recommendation to the state was clear: Their social condition has not improved, and support must reflect that reality" (as cited in The New Indian Express, 2026, para. 18).

Comparative Analysis: Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims

5.1 Points of Convergence

Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims share fundamental structural conditions. Both communities are excluded from Scheduled Caste benefits under the 1950 Presidential Order (Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950; Venkatesan, 2026). Both experience caste-based discrimination within their religious communities, including separate places of worship, prohibitions on inter-caste marriage, and social segregation (Jodhka, 2012; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). Both face "double discrimination": communal discrimination from the wider society and caste-based discrimination from within their own communities (Azam, 2018; Ilaiah, 2006; Jayal, 2006). Both have mounted sustained legal and political challenges to their exclusion, including through the National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC) and the Pasmada Muslim Mahaz (Anwar, 2001; Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014; ThePrint, 2024). And both have been the subject of commission reports (Gopal Singh Panel, Ranganath Mishra Commission, Sachar Committee, Balakrishnan Commission) recommending inclusion, yet remain excluded (Government of India, Panel on Minorities, 1983; Government of India, Prime Minister's High Level Committee, 2006; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

The scale of each community differs significantly. Dalit Christians constitute an estimated 50-70% of India's approximately 35 million Christians, or roughly 17.5 to 24.5 million people (Jodhka, 2012; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). Dalit Muslims, while a smaller proportion of the Muslim population (estimated at 1-10%, depending on definition), still number in the millions given India's Muslim population of approximately 200 million (Azam, 2018; Sachar Committee, as cited in Government of India, Prime Minister's High Level Committee, 2006). The 2011 Census places Muslims at 14.2% and Christians at 2.3% of the population (Government of India, 2011).

5.2 Points of Divergence

Despite these shared conditions, significant divergences exist between the two communities. First, the political mobilization around Dalit Muslim issues has produced a distinctive conceptual vocabulary-"Pasmada Muslims" (meaning "those left behind")-that has gained significant traction in North Indian political discourse (Anwar, 2001; ThePrint, 2024). Ali Anwar's Pasmada Muslim Mahaz

has successfully framed caste among Muslims as a matter of social justice, challenging both upper-caste Muslim dominance and Hindu nationalist narratives (Anwar, 2001; Ilaiah, 2006). No equivalent pan-Indian mobilization exists among Dalit Christians, who remain fragmented across denominations and regions (Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014; ZENIT News Agency, 2014).

Second, the Catholic Church, despite its internal caste hierarchies, has provided institutional support for Dalit Christian claims, including the CBCI's annual "black day" protests on August 10 and

its advocacy before the Supreme Court (Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014; ZENIT News Agency, 2014). No comparable institutional support exists for Dalit Muslims; indeed, as Shireen Azam (2018) argues, the exclusion of Dalit Muslim castes from the SC list is "largely a consequence of Ashraf dominance in Muslim political representation, with upper-caste representatives showing little interest in addressing the conditions of lower-caste Muslims" (p. 49).

Third, the socio-economic profiles of the two communities differ. According to the 2008 National Commission of Minorities study, "Dalit Muslims are clearly the worst off among all Dalits, while Dalit Christians are somewhat better off than other Dalits except Sikh Dalits (who are by far the best off, especially in the rural sector)" (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007, p. 78). This divergence may reflect regional concentration (Dalit Christians concentrated in South India, where development indicators are generally higher) and differential access to missionary education (Jodhka, 2012).

Fourth, state-level recognition varies significantly. Southern states including Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka have extended some constitutional benefits to Dalit Christians, creating a patchwork of recognition that complicates national-level advocacy (The New Indian Express, 2022; Venkatesan, 2026). No comparable state-level recognition exists for Dalit Muslims (Azam, 2018).

5.3 The Question of Relative Backwardness

The divergence in socio-economic profiles raises a question that has been central to legal and political debates: Should the extension of Scheduled Caste benefits be contingent on demonstrated socio-economic backwardness? The constitutional logic of affirmative action is remedial: it aims to address historical disadvantage, not to reward religious identity. As the NCRLM recommended in 2004, "the basic criteria for reservation should be socio-economic backwardness with the foolproof arrangement of the issue of certificates, not 'religion' or 'caste'" (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007, p. 112).

From this perspective, the case for including Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims is strong but not automatic. Empirical evidence demonstrates that both communities experience significant caste-based discrimination and socio-economic disadvantage (Jodhka, 2012; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007; Pew Research Centre, 2021). However, the degree of disadvantage varies, and a principled framework would require case-by-case assessment rather than blanket inclusion or exclusion. The current framework, which excludes all Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims regardless of their socio-economic condition, is clearly overbroad and violates the principle of equality (Jayal, 2006; Venkatesan, 2026).

Resistance Movements and Legal Challenges

6.1 The National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC)

The National Council of Dalit Christians (NCDC) has been demanding the inclusion of Dalit Christians and Muslims in the Scheduled Castes list by deleting Paragraph 3 of the 1950 Order since 1980 (Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2014; ZENIT News Agency, 2014). The NCDC has filed appeals with several state courts and the Supreme Court, demanding that the quotas reserved for Dalits be made "religion-neutral" based on the principle of equality enshrined in the Constitution (Venkatesan, 2026; ZENIT News Agency, 2014). A petition filed in the Supreme Court in 2004 demanding an end to discrimination against Dalit Christians remains pending before a three-judge bench (*Soosai v. Union of*

India, 2004; Venkatesan, 2026).

Franklin Caesar Thomas, the Dalit Catholic lawyer who filed the 2004 petition, has emphasized that the *Chinthada Anand* ruling "does not have any legal impact" on the broader constitutional challenge (as cited in Venkatesan, 2026, para. 15). He notes that past inquiry commissions, including the Ranganath Misra Commission, "have clearly stated that conversion to Christianity does not end caste discrimination in society" (as cited in Venkatesan, 2026, para. 16).

6.2 The Pasmada Muslim Movement

The Pasmada Muslim movement, led by figures such as Ali Anwar and Dr. Ezaz Ali, has emerged as a significant force in North Indian politics (Anwar, 2001; ThePrint, 2024). The movement emerged from the political opportunity structure created by the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report (1991), which inspired downtrodden communities to assert their rights based on caste identities (Anwar, 2001; Ilaiah, 2006). The All India Muslim OBC Organisation (AIMOBCO) and the Pasmada Muslim Mahaz have conducted massive campaigns for the identification of caste groups within the Muslim community and for the extension of reservation benefits to Dalit Muslims (Anwar, 2001; ThePrint, 2024).

The movement has achieved significant discursive success, popularizing the term "Pasmada" as a category that cuts across religious boundaries and emphasizes shared material deprivation (Anwar, 2001). However, it has not yet achieved its primary legal objective: inclusion in the Scheduled Castes list (ThePrint, 2024).

6.3 Commission Reports: Gopal Singh, Ranganath Mishra, Sachar, and Balakrishnan

The exclusion of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims has been the subject of multiple commission reports, all of which have recommended inclusion. The Gopal Singh Panel (1983) recommended that the plea of Christian and Muslim Dalits "should be heeded with utmost sympathy" (Government of India, Panel on Minorities, 1983, p. 45). The National Commission for Minorities (1992) similarly recommended deletion of Paragraph 3 (National Commission for Minorities, 1992, as cited in National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). The Ranganath Mishra Commission (2007) explicitly concluded that non-inclusion "amounts to discrimination on the basis of religion" and recommended that SC status be made fully religion-neutral (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007, p. 112). The Sachar Committee (2006) documented the broader socio-economic deprivation of Muslims and the comparatively worse conditions of Pasmada Muslims (Government of India, Prime Minister's High Level Committee, 2006).

The Union Government drafted a bill in 1996 to amend the 1950 Order, but it was never introduced in Parliament due to divergent opinions among state and union territory governments (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007; Venkatesan, 2026). In 2022, the government appointed a new commission under former Chief Justice K.G. Balakrishnan to study the socio-economic conditions of Dalit converts, with a deadline of April 2025, later extended to October 2025 (ThePrint, 2024; Venkatesan, 2026). The commission has yet to submit its report.

6.4 Hindu Nationalist Opposition

The Sangh Parivar, particularly the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), has consistently opposed the inclusion of Dalit Christians and Muslims in the Scheduled Castes list (Jodhka, 2012; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). Their argument is twofold. First, they claim that including Dalit Christians would open "floodgates" for religious conversions, as missionaries would target "the weaker sections" for conversion (as cited in Jodhka, 2012, p. 102). Second, they argue that Dalit Christians are socio-economically better off than Dalit Hindus, citing the extension of benefits to Dalit Christians in southern states as evidence (as cited in National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007, p. 89).

Both arguments are empirically questionable. The claim that inclusion would incentivize conversion assumes that Dalits convert primarily for material benefits—an assumption contradicted by

the fact that conversion to Christianity or Islam currently results in the *loss* of Scheduled Caste benefits (Venkatesan, 2026). As for relative socio-economic status, the evidence is mixed and varies by region; in any case, the solution is to base benefits on demonstrated backwardness, not to exclude entire communities categorically (Jayal, 2006; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

Toward Secular Caste Recognition: A Proposal

7.1 The Case for De-Linking Religion and Caste

The constitutional framework for affirmative action in India already includes religion-neutral categories. Scheduled Tribes (STs) are defined on the basis of ethnicity, not religion; a tribal person who converts to Christianity or Islam remains eligible for ST benefits (Jayal, 2006; Venkatesan, 2026). Similarly, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) are defined without religious restriction (Government of India, 2008; Jayal, 2006). The anomaly of the Scheduled Castes category—the only category defined by religious identity—has no principled basis (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

The extension of ST benefits to converts regardless of religion demonstrates that religion-neutral affirmative action is administratively feasible. As Jayal (2006) notes, "If a Scheduled Caste converts to Christianity or Islam, s/he is automatically deprived of that status. However, if the convert happens to be a Scheduled Tribe person, s/he continues to be eligible for the benefits of reservation, because this is based on ethnicity rather than religion" (p. 30). This inconsistency is constitutionally anomalous and morally indefensible (Venkatesan, 2026).

7.2 Operationalizing Secular Caste Recognition

A framework of "secular caste recognition" would involve three components. First, deletion of Paragraph 3 of the 1950 Presidential Order, removing the religious restriction on Scheduled Caste status (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007; Venkatesan, 2026). Second, a nationally standardized process for certifying caste status based on socio-economic indicators, not religious identity, drawing on the methodology developed by the Mandal Commission and refined by subsequent studies (Government of India, 1980; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). Third, safeguards against fraud, including verification mechanisms and penalties for false claims (Jayal, 2006).

Critics may argue that extending SC benefits to Dalit Christians and Muslims would increase the total reservation pool beyond constitutional limits. This objection is misguided for two reasons. First, the Supreme Court's 50% cap on reservations applies to the proportion of seats reserved, not to the number of communities eligible for reservation (Jayal, 2006; *Indra Sawhney v. Union of India*, 1992). Second, as experts have noted, Dalit Christians and Muslims together constitute "less than 2% of the total Dalit population of India," so their inclusion would represent a minimal increase in the reservation pool (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007, p. 115).

7.3 Restoring *Ziran*

The framework of secular caste recognition is not merely a policy proposal but a response to the distortion of *ziran* described in section two. By decoupling constitutional protection from religious identity, secular caste recognition would restore to Dalit converts the ability to live authentically—to practice their chosen religion without fear of losing protection from caste-based discrimination, and to claim protection from such discrimination without renouncing their religious identity (Ames, 1994; Hall & Ames, 1998).

As the *Zhuangzi* teaches, authentic selfhood emerges when external impositions do not distort one's natural development (Watson, 1968). The current constitutional framework imposes a cruel choice: abandon the religion of one's conscience or abandon protection from caste-based discrimination.

This is not a choice that any individual should be forced to make. Secular caste recognition would eliminate this choice, allowing Dalit converts to exist as they are-neither wholly defined by their caste nor able to escape its consequences-and to claim the protection to which they are entitled as citizens.

Conclusion

This article has examined the condition of Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims in India through the theoretical lens of *ziran*-the Daoist concept of authentic, spontaneous selfhood (Ames, 1994; Hall &

Ames, 1998). The constitutional exclusion of these communities from Scheduled Caste benefits, despite the persistence of caste-based discrimination within their religious communities, constitutes a profound distortion of *ziran* (Venkatesan, 2026). It forces Dalit converts to choose between religious freedom and protection from caste discrimination, denies them the benefits of affirmative action designed to address historical disadvantage, and perpetuates a juridical fiction that conversion produces an absolute break from caste hierarchies (Jayal, 2006; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

The empirical evidence presented in this article demonstrates that caste persists across religious boundaries in India. Analysis of Pew Research Centre data reveals that overwhelming majorities of Muslims and Christians acknowledge the presence of caste within their communities, and resistance to inter-caste marriage remains high, particularly among Muslims (Pew Research Centre, 2021; TheQuint, 2021). Qualitative evidence documents caste-based discrimination within both Christian and Muslim communities, including separate places of worship, segregated seating, separate burial grounds, and prohibition of inter-caste marriage (Jodhka, 2012; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). The case of Kevin Joseph, murdered for loving a woman from an upper caste, illustrates the deadly consequences of this discrimination (Government of Kerala, 2023; The New Indian Express, 2026).

The legal and political architecture of exclusion has been sustained for seventy-five years despite multiple commission reports recommending inclusion (Government of India, Panel on Minorities, 1983; Government of India, Prime Minister's High Level Committee, 2006; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). The 1950 Presidential Order, while amended to include Sikh and Buddhist Dalits, continues to exclude Christian and Muslim Dalits on grounds that have no principled basis (Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950; Venkatesan, 2026). The Supreme Court has consistently affirmed this exclusion, most recently in the 2026 *Chinthada Anand* ruling (*Chinthada Anand v. State of Andhra Pradesh*, 2026). Hindu nationalist opposition, based on fears of incentivizing conversion and claims of relative socio-economic advantage, has blocked legislative reform (Jodhka, 2012).

The framework of secular caste recognition proposed in this article offers a path forward. By de-linking Scheduled Caste status from religious identity and basing it on socio-economic indicators, India can fulfill the constitutional promise of equality while respecting religious freedom (National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007). This framework would restore the *ziran* that state-enforced hierarchies systematically distort, allowing Dalit converts to exist authentically-neither forced to renounce their religion nor denied protection from the caste discrimination that continues to shape their lives (Ames, 1994; Hall & Ames, 1998).

The stakes are high. As the JB Koshy Commission noted, denying support based on faith amounts to administrative injustice (Government of Kerala, 2023, p. 72). As the CBCI's 2026 assembly stated, "The denial of rights to Dalit Christians continues for decades as an indirect form of discrimination, despite numerous appeals for equality and justice" (Catholic Bishops Conference of India, 2026, para. 3). Seventy-five years after the Constitution came into effect, it is time to recognize that caste is a pan-Indian social institution that transcends religious boundaries, and that constitutional protection must do the same (Jayal, 2006; National Commission for Religious and Linguistic Minorities, 2007).

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