

April 30, 2009

## **Dalits in India face attacks and intimidation in polls, fear more violence to come**

Dalits in India have come under serious attack and intimidation preventing many from voting in the country's much publicized elections and human rights organizations are warning of further violence and targeted attacks in the next phase of voting.

On Thursday India will conduct its third round of voting in several states, including Gujarat which has seen violence by Hindu extremists in the recent past. Dalit organizations fear incidents of intimidation and threats leading to large scale 'silent' rigging of the votes of these communities.

'In Gujarat there is a general atmosphere of fear and people are less likely to speak out against the dominant groups because of the history of violence in the state. We fear that this may lead to voter intimidation and rigging of votes,' says **Sirivella Prasad** of the National Campaign for Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR).

'Through this election we have seen a clear pattern of violence and abuse against Dalits preventing them from exercising their right to vote. The Dalits who have resisted and asserted their rights have had to pay a heavy price,' Prasad adds.

In the last two phases of voting NCDHR's National Dalit Election Watch (NDEW) has recorded 263 incidents of election violence against Dalits, formally known as 'untouchables' in India. The violence manifests in several forms with Dalits being threatened, abused and prevented from voting and also violently attacked after the polls.

According to NDEW the largest number of incidents was recorded in Bihar, which so far has been one of the areas worst affected by post election violence. In one horrific incident on 23 April, 74 houses in Musahar (Dalit) Tola in Ranti Panchayat (Madhubani District of Bihar), housing over 300 people, were burnt down. Another 70 houses were looted.

In Andhra Pradesh in Guntur district on the same day a 'social boycott' was imposed on a village barring Dalits from shopping or accessing any village services.

Before elections Dalit communities are threatened and ordered not to vote or vote for candidates against their choice. On some occasions they have found their names deleted from voting lists and/or their proof of identity has not been accepted at the polling station preventing them from voting.

In Orissa, which saw a spate of attacks against Dalit Christians throughout 2008, politicians 'threatened to cut off people's hands, burn houses, and chase them out of the village, if they did not vote as instructed,' NDEW reports.

'This is gross abuse of the basic right to vote and this violence must be viewed in the overall context of large-scale discrimination and abuse faced by Dalits in India,' says Prasad.

“This pattern will continue in the next round but we expect more violence after the elections in many states, because once the election is over – no one cares what happens.”

NCDHR-NDEW calls on the Indian government to ensure security and the free and fair exercise of Dalit's right to vote both before and after the elections, especially in areas which have experienced increased incidents of violence.

## **Notes**

India is conducting elections in a phased manner across the country to elect members of parliament and a new government.

The next round of voting takes place on 30 April in Bihar, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Jammu & Kashmir, Gujarat, Sikkim, Dadar and Nagar Haveli, Daman and Diu. Following this there are two more rounds on 7 May and 15 May.

NDEW is monitoring elections in 210 parliamentary constituencies across 3325 polling stations in 14 states. There are 3690 volunteers in these villages watching the polls.

Dalits face severe caste-based discrimination in India. According to NCDHR everyday Dalits face 27 incidents of violations against the Prevention of Atrocities Acts, although these are rarely investigated adequately by law enforcement officers.

India has some 180 million Dalits or Scheduled Castes, including a small proportion of Dalit Muslims and Dalit Christians with the majority Hindu.

Founded in 1998 the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights is a forum committed to the elimination of discrimination based on caste.