# Scheduled Castes & Religion - The Supreme Court's Ruling

***Mains:*** *GS-II – Polity & Governance*

## Why in News?

*The Supreme Court ruled in Chinthada Anand vs State of Andhra Pradesh that a pastor from the Madiga community in Andhra Pradesh could not claim to be a member of a Scheduled Caste (SC) as he had converted to Christianity.*

## What is the case background & Supreme Court's ruling?

- **Bench & its ruling** – The bench comprising Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and Manmohan upheld the Andhra Pradesh HC's order & said that *other than Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism*, a person cannot simultaneously profess and practice a religion and claim membership of a Scheduled Caste at the same time.
- The judgement holds that this bar on religion imposed by the Constitution (SC) Order *was "absolute" without exceptions*.
- **Case Background**
  - **Complainant** – Pastor Chintada Anand Paul, originally from the Madiga community (a recognized SC).
  - **Incident** – He alleged caste-based abuse, threats, and assaults in 2021.
  - **Legal Action** – Case registered under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 including the criminal provisions of wrongful restraint, criminal intimidation, and hurt under the IPC provisions.
  - **Defense Argument** – Since he had converted to Christianity and was functioning as a pastor, he could not claim SC status or invoke the SC/ST Act.
  - **Complainant's Counter** – Caste is linked to birth and persists despite conversion; he relied on his caste certificate identifying him as a Hindu-Madiga, a recognised Scheduled Caste.
- **Andhra Pradesh High Court (April 2025) –** Held that *"caste system is alien to Christianity"* & the SC/ST Act is protective legislation meant only for SC/ST members as defined by law.
- The court held that there were inconsistencies and a lack of corroborating evidence in the witness statements & continuing the proceedings would serve no purpose and would amount to subjecting the accused to an unnecessary trial.
- The *Supreme Court of India has upheld this view*.
- **Supreme Court's Reasoning**
  - **Religion as determinant** – SC identity is inseparable from the religion professed.
  - **Christianity's theological foundation** – The Court noted Christianity does not

recognize caste as an institution.
    - **Consequences of conversion** – The moment one ceases to be a member of a SC by converting faith, loss of SC status will lead to automatic termination of all statutory benefits, protections, reservations, and entitlements, includes protections under the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.
    - **Certificates insufficient –** Mere possession of a caste certificate cannot override the fact of conversion that the appellant is a practising Christian.
    - **Reconversions** – No evidence of reconversion or community acceptance was shown in this case, so SC status could not be restored.
- **2 Competing Ideas**
    - **Constitutional design** – SC status is both a social identity and a legal recognition defined by the Constitution (SC Order, 1950).
    - **Social reality** – Caste-based discrimination persists even after conversion, especially among Dalit Christians.

## What are the Constitutional & legal mandate related to the SCs & religion?

- **The Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order, 1950** – It was issued under Article 341.
- Paragraph 3 of the Order states that, "no person who professes a religion different from the *Hindu, the Sikh or the Buddhist religion* shall be deemed to be member of a Scheduled Caste."
- The law thus treats conversion to Christianity as a point at which the Scheduled Caste status ends.
- **Article 366(24)** – It defines Scheduled Castes as those groups notified by the President under Article 341.
- This makes SC identity a legal construct, not just a social one.
- **SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989** – It adopts the same definitions of SC/ST as in the Constitution.
- The legal protections under the Act *apply only to those recognized as SC/ST* under Articles 341/342.
- The result is that the legal identity of a person as a Scheduled Caste is inseparable from the religion they profess.
- Once their social membership to the community ends, the legal protections tied to it end as well.

## Is this question new? What is the Centre's position on this?

- **Is this Question New?** – No, the Court has addressed the question of SC status for people from Dalit communities who have converted to Islam or Christianity.
- A petition to accord SC status for Dalit Christians and Muslims was filed in 2004 and continues to be heard today.
- **Petitioners' Argument**
    - Several communities had historically belonged to SC groups but had, over time, converted to faiths such as Christianity and Islam.
    - Despite conversion, caste discrimination persisted within these faiths.
    - Petitioners cited government reports from the early 2000s supporting their position that Dalit Muslims and Christians should be accorded SC status.

    - They argued that the Constitution (SC) Order, 1950, had been amended to include Sikhism (1956) & Buddhism (1990), following Ambedkar's mass conversions.
- **Centre's Position** – The Union Government relies on the Constitution (SC) Order, 1950, which restricts SC recognition to Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists.
- The Centre has consistently opposed extending SC status to Dalit Christians and Muslims because Christianity and Islam are of "foreign origin".
- **Current Developments** – In October 2022, the Centre constituted a *Commission of Inquiry* headed by former Chief Justice of India K.G. Balakrishnan to examine the issue of whether SC status can be accorded to SC converts to Islam and Christianity.
- The Commission's deadline is set for April this year.

## What about people who have "reconverted" to Hinduism, Sikhism, or Buddhism?

- **Court's Threshold for Reconversion** – On March 24, 2026, the Judges clarified what counts as valid reconversion for regaining Scheduled Caste (SC) status, what is the burden of proof for this, and who this burden must fall upon.
- **Three Conditions** – If a person of SC origin claimed that they had "reconverted" to any of the faiths mentioned in the 1950 order, all conditions must be met "cumulatively and conclusively" -
    - **Proof of Origin** – The person must be able to prove that they "originally belonged" to an SC group.
    - **Evidence of Reconversion** – There must be "credible and unimpeachable evidence of bona fide reconversion to the original religion".
    - **Community Acceptance** – There must be evidence of "acceptance and assimilation by members of the original caste and concerned community."
- **Burden of Proof** – The Court said that the "burden of proving reconversion lies *entirely on the claimant*, to be proven through unimpeachable evidence."
- **What Counts as Proof of Reconversion?** - The Supreme Court said that this should be accompanied by
    - Complete & unequivocal renunciation of the religion previously adopted
    - Total dissociation from that faith.
    - Actual adoption and observance of the customs, usages, practices, rituals, and religious obligations of the original caste."

## What about Scheduled Tribes (STs)?

- **No Religion-Based Bar** – For STs, there was no such religion-based exclusion prescribed in the Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950.
- The determination of ST status is tied to tribal attributes including customary practices, social organisation, community life, etc, not the faith professed alone.
- **Court's Reasoning**
    - If a person's conversion or later actions completely break their connection with the tribal way of life and they lose recognition within the community, their ST status is weakened.
    - Conversely, if the tribal attributes remain or are re-established and accepted by the community, the claim cannot be automatically rejected.

    - Such cases must be evaluated on a fact-specific basis by the competent authority in accordance with constitutional principles.
- **Social Context** – Hundreds of ST communities profess Christianity, Islam, and indigenous faiths, such as Sarnaism.
- In Nagaland, entire ST groups have converted to Christianity or Islam.
- In Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, some Adivasi movements argue that ST converts to non-indigenous faiths should lose statutory benefits.
- This shows the regional diversity and ongoing debates around tribal identity and benefits.

## References


1. The Hindu | What did the SC's rule on Scheduled Castes and religion?
2. Indian Express | Ruling on Scheduled Castes and religion



SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering