



# NBO

## NETWORK OF BUDDHIST ORGANISATIONS

### Report to the “All Party Parliamentary Group on International Religious Freedom”

*Modgala, March 2013*

The issues we in the NBO UK know about are: Chinese oppression of Tibetan religious rights; destruction of temples and genocidal violence against Buddhist tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts plus the dire situation of members of these hill tribes in India; continuing violence against Dalit converts in India and the appalling situation of many Dalit Muslims in India. Though sadly there is Muslim violence against religious targets in Thailand none of us are happy about Buddhists getting their own back against Muslims in the Arakan division of Burma. There's an ethnic and social overlap in all these cases.

**Regarding China:** visitors to Tibet often remark on the apparent freedom of religious practice. Prayer Flags flutter on the tops of buildings and every home has an altar. However the Chinese Communist Party remains fundamentally hostile to religion. While Chinese leaders have spoken of a "freedom to believe" policy in Tibet, the Communist Party has spoken of "too much religious activity in the area" and wants to curb the numbers entering the monasteries. China's five officially sanctioned religious organizations are afforded a degree protection, but are subject to restrictions and controls under the [State Administration for Religious Affairs](#). Unregistered religious groups face varying degrees of harassment, including imprisonment, torture, and [forced religious conversion](#).<sup>[2]</sup>

**Regarding India:** A recent returning Amida Trust monk informs me that in Mizoram. Chakma tribes people suffer greater levels of poverty than the Christian majority and have limited access to essential services such as healthcare and education. Evidence suggests that the Mizo population and Christian missionaries are forcing Chakma people to convert. If they do not there is evidence that their children are refused school places. There are no alternatives in many areas to Christian run schools. Whilst as far as I am aware the Indian constitution states that every citizen has the right to practice their religious beliefs free of discrimination and persecution, this does not lead to any action relative to the Chakmas in Mizoram but the Chakmas do not have a status in India. They are not officially classified as Indian citizens (because they originate from areas now part of Bangladesh) but they are also not classified as Bangladesh citizens in Bangladesh. In short then they are 'stateless'..

It is virtually impossible to enter Arunachal Pradesh where many Chakmas live in appalling conditions as refugees without refugee status even though many were originally given citizenship in the early 70's when they were forced out of Bangladesh because of violence and the building of the Kaprua dam. I suggest that the Indian authorities should be asked to consider acting to stop illegal conversions and to address the status of Chakmas in the region.

**In Bangladesh** the Chakmas and the Jumma people are subject to violence and being forced off their lands by the Muslim majority Bengalis both local and military. Al Jazeera has some good interviews and info from Bengali people who are appalled at the military rule in the Chittagong Hill tracts and

treatment of the tribespeople. It is hard to get information and here the social media provides opportunities where foreigners are not allowed into the militarised zones.

The UK-based Karuna Trust has projects in India and can give much info about the situation of Dalits. 'Low caste' and tribal communities struggle as landless day labourers, in constant danger of violence and exploitation, with little or no recourse to the law or police. At best their children receive a few years of substandard schooling. There are incidents against Buddhist Dalits however they are learning that it is Muslim Dalits who suffer most as they are not granted the status of scheduled caste and other rights and have no recourse to prevention of atrocity act and other rights. It is important to lobby the Indian government to recognise Muslim Dalits in scheduled castes.

Not recognising the problem of caste in our own equalities act would have impact abroad. We are relieved that peers said that discrimination on the grounds of caste should be outlawed in the UK, and defeated the government in a vote in the House of Lords yesterday.

I am shocked that the government opposed the move, saying it had set up an education programme to tackle caste discrimination. This is not enough as what is done here in the UK has repercussions abroad and builds the sense of despair those suffering from caste issues are accruing.

Some further thoughts on what policy steps the UK Government could and should be taking:

- Resist all calls for new UN supported blasphemy laws as these will provide a fig leaf for repressive discrimination already taking place in some Muslim regimes.
- Draw attention to incidents of discrimination and violence where religion is a major exacerbating factor and there is a clear breach of the right to religious freedom
- Point out breaches of religious freedom through diplomatic channels and put pressure on relevant authorities
- Address the difficulty in obtaining visas for ministers of religion in beleaguered communities. They need religious training in the UK in order to assist their people back in their home countries.

Finally we must remember that Hungary was refusing recognition to various faiths (including Buddhist and Hindu), on NBO's behalf IFN UK got in touch with a unit in the Foreign Office that expressed our concerns - and Hungary gave way. Probably in the issues I have cited, several departments might be involved. Please seek avenues to monitor developments and exert pressure.

The NBO wishes to be kept in touch with developments and can be a conduit for information in both directions. The NBO already has an European dimension and, since several of its members have wider international interests, our Network will wish to be in touch with such issues as part of its UK representation.

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