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UPSC 360°

The Hindu Unwrapped - Daily Current Affairs Mastery for UPSC CSE (Clear that it's based on The Hindu editorials / news analyses - very aspirant-friendly)

Significance

The ruling of the Supreme Court of India reinforces the constitutional framework of Scheduled Caste status, limiting it to Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. It impacts debates on reservation, religious conversion, and social justice, while highlighting the need to reassess caste-based discrimination beyond religious boundaries.

Supreme Court Rules Scheduled Caste Status Limited to Hindus, Buddhists & Sikhs

Why in News?

- ❖ On **18 March 2026**, a two-judge bench of the Supreme Court comprising **Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra** and **Manmohan** delivered a landmark judgment clarifying that **Scheduled Caste (SC) status is available only to persons professing Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism.**
- ❖ Conversion to any other religion results in **immediate and complete loss of Scheduled Caste status** and all associated benefits, including reservation in education/jobs and protection under the **SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.**
- ❖ The ruling came in the case of **Chinthada Anand**, a Hindu-Madiga (Scheduled Caste) who converted to Christianity and became a pastor. He had claimed protection under the SC/ST Atrocities Act after alleging caste-based atrocities.

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- ❖ The Supreme Court upheld the Andhra Pradesh High Court's decision that he could no longer claim SC benefits as a Christian. The judgment has sparked nationwide debate on religion-based reservations, conversion, reconversion, and social justice policy.

Key Details of the Supreme Court Judgment

- **Core Ruling**
 - Clause 3 of the **Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950** is “categorical and absolute”.
 - A person who professes a religion different from Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism **cannot** be deemed a member of a Scheduled Caste.
 - Conversion leads to **immediate and complete loss** of SC status from the moment of conversion, irrespective of birth.
- **Interpretation of “Profess”**
 - The term “profess” means publicly declaring or practising a religion.
 - It is not merely a question of private belief but requires an outward manifestation.
- **Reconversion Clause**
 - A person who converts back to Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism can claim SC benefits **only if** they provide “credible and unimpeachable evidence” of bona fide reconversion **and** acceptance back into the original caste community.
- **Scheduled Tribes Order, 1950**
 - The Court also clarified that a person who completely renounces tribal customs, rituals, and practices and assimilates into another religion cannot claim Scheduled Tribe benefits.

Background: Legal Framework on SC Status & Religion

- **Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950**
 - Originally limited SC status to Hindus.

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- Amended in **1956** to include Sikhs.
- Amended in **1990** to include Buddhists.
- No provision for Christians or Muslims.

• Judicial Precedents

- **Soosai v. Union of India (1985)**: SC status is not purely based on caste but also on social and religious identity.
- **Punjabrao v. Meshram (1965)**: Conversion to Buddhism does not automatically lead to loss of SC status (later incorporated by amendment).

• Current Case

- Chinthada Anand (born Hindu-Madiga SC) converted to Christianity → claimed protection under SC/ST Atrocities Act → High Court rejected → Supreme Court upheld.

Implications

• Legal & Constitutional

- Reinforces that SC status is **religion-specific** under the 1950 Order.
- Strengthens the link between SC benefits and Hindu/Sikh/Buddhist identity.
- May encourage “Ghar Wapsi” (reconversion) movements.

• Social Justice

- Affects millions of SC converts (especially in South India and among Dalit Christians).
- Raises questions on equality, religious freedom (Article 25), and substantive equality (Article 14).

• Political & Policy

- May intensify demands for extending SC benefits to Dalit Christians and Muslims.

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- Impacts reservation in jobs, education, and political representation.
- **For India**
 - Deepens the ongoing debate on caste vs. religion in reservation policy.
 - Highlights tension between secularism and protective discrimination.

UPSC CSE & State Relevance

Prelims

- Key terms: Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950, Clause 3, SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, Reconversion
- Data: Amendments (1956 for Sikhs, 1990 for Buddhists)
- Related: Articles 14, 15, 16, 25; Fifth Schedule (contrast with Sixth)

GS-1 (Society)

- Caste, religion, and social justice
- Dalit rights and conversion issues

GS-2 (Polity & Governance)

- Judicial interpretation of constitutional orders
- Reservation policy and affirmative action

GS-2 (Social Justice)

- Rights of marginalised communities and religion-based exclusions

Essay / Interview

- "Scheduled Caste Status and Religious Conversion: Balancing Social Justice with Constitutional Identity"

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- “From NALSA to SC Status Judgment: Evolving Jurisprudence on Religion and Reservation in India”

MCQs

1. With reference to the Supreme Court judgment on Scheduled Caste status (March 2026), consider the following statements:
2. Scheduled Caste status is available only to persons professing Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sikhism.
3. Conversion to Christianity or Islam leads to immediate loss of SC benefits.
4. The judgment was delivered in the case of Chinthada Anand.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (d)

2. Clause 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 was amended in 1990 to include:
 - (a) Sikhs
 - (b) Buddhists
 - (c) Christians
 - (d) Jains

Answer: (b)

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3. Which Article of the Constitution guarantees the right to equality that was invoked in the judgment?

- (a) Article 15
- (b) Article 14
- (c) Article 21
- (d) Article 25

Answer: (b)

4. The SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 provides protection to:

- (a) Only Hindus
- (b) Members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes
- (c) Only religious minorities
- (d) All citizens **Answer: (b)**

Mains Questions

1. "The Supreme Court's March 2026 judgment on Scheduled Caste status reaffirms the religion-specific nature of reservation benefits." Critically examine its constitutional basis and social implications. (15 marks / 250 words)
2. Discuss the tension between religious freedom (Article 25) and protective discrimination under the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 in light of the recent Supreme Court verdict. (10 marks / 150 words)
3. "Reservation policy in India must balance social justice with constitutional identity." Analyse this statement with reference to the Supreme Court ruling on SC status and conversion. (15 marks / 250 words)
4. **Essay (250 marks)** "Religion, Caste and Reservation: The Supreme Court's Verdict and the Future of Social Justice in India."

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