Civil society rings alarm over Bengal since May 4, flags violence against minorities

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A collective of prominent civil society members, journalists, former bureaucrats and rights activists on Tuesday expressed alarm over how far Bengal had digressed from the rights assured to citizens by the Constitution in the six months since May 4.

Condemning the 48 attacks on Christian minorities in these six months of BJP rule in the state, besides the SIR, detentions and deportation of Bengali-speaking Indians on suspicion of being Bangladeshi, and human rights violations, they mounted a scathing critique at a news meet at the Press Club here.

Former Rajya Sabha member and ex-Prasar Bharati chief Jawhar Sircar detailed the official apathy surrounding targeted violence against the state's Christian minority.

"The oppression of Christians is happening at such a level — among the most helpless, the most backward — because the oppressors have one worry: that it doesn't become international news.... They go to small places where prayer meetings happen, in village huts, and beat people up.... This has never happened before. It has no history in Bengal," he said. "It is actually the new goons.... Every area has its own BJP-backers overnight," Sircar stated. "They don't even do it under the party banner, they do it under Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu Jagran Manch...."

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Organised under the aegis of Karwan-e-Mohabbat, the Sabar Institute, and Aamra, the media briefing followed an extensive daylong public hearing on Monday where victim testimonies, grassroots legal workers, and fact-finding delegations presented evidence of intimidation across districts including North and South 24-Parganas, Hooghly, Howrah, and East and West Midnapore.

Amnesty International India's chair of the board, journalist Aakar Patel delivered a sharp warning regarding the institutional erosion across the state. "I don't believe we are in a clear and fair state. I don't think that what Bengal has gone through can qualify as being a fair poll," Patel stated, insisting that full restoration of dropped voters remains the only remedy. "A state that has a quarter of its population as minorities cannot escape damaging itself by harming those minorities."

Author and social activist Harsh Mander placed the administrative roll exercise squarely within a broader framework of state-sponsored exclusion. "What is happening is actually NRC on steroids through the vehicle of the SIR, a mass exclusion and filtration of people," he said.

Sircar challenged the legality of deleting millions of voters through automated algorithms and unexplained categories like "logical discrepancy". He pointed to the stark discrepancy between the official claims of infiltration and actual data.

"Chief minister Suvendu Adhikari said on August 7 he would throw out 1.5 crore Bangladeshi 'infiltrators'.... He claimed 1.5 crore infiltrators... not even 1,200 have been found," Sircar

observed.

"(Chief election commissioner) Gyanesh Kumar, you know, is removing 13 crore Indians, right? And how many infiltrators did Gyanesh actually find? The ECI's official claim (before the judiciary) states they found no more than 1,600... most of them Nepali," he added.

Journalist and socio-political activist John Dayal highlighted the weaponisation of legal frameworks against vulnerable groups.

"The Constitution does not protect the victims of people who do not believe in the Constitution," Dayal noted, condemning the systematic targeting of religious minorities. "The sudden onslaught of violence against Christians in Bengal has come as a blow to activists.... The people's tribunal heard the victims in open session and was struck by the strength of their faith, their courage, and their resolve in adversity to pursue justice instead of ineffective compromise."

Social-environmental activist Vidya Dinker concluded with an urgent call for stern press scrutiny and public mobilisation.

"Attending the people's tribunal was like waking up to a hitherto unknown dark underbelly of Bengal... and really to hear those stories of repeated, targeted, and systematic assault was shocking, to say the least," Dinker remarked.

"Unless the Fourth Estate does its duty and brings up these issues to the rest of society here, we won't see a change," she added.

Former chief information commissioner and former chief of the national minorities commission Wajahat Habibullah said the Constitution is what makes India.

"I, as an Indian, am concerned: Is that concept of India being defended by those elected to authority in our country to protect that Constitution?" he asked. "We are here to understand, to express solidarity, to affirm that we will stand with the ordinary people in their struggle to regain the Bengal of Rabindranath Tagore and Swami Vivekananda," he added.