

UNCHECKED

THE RISE OF HINDU NATIONALISM,
LEGAL REPRESSION, AND MOB
VIOLENCE IN THE WORLD'S
LARGEST DEMOCRACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As India celebrates the 76th anniversary of its independence on August 15, the country is farther from its roots as a secular democracy than ever. Led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing religious nationalist party, India is moving rapidly to restrict the rights of religious minorities across the country.

Legally, the rise of anti-conversion laws criminalizes minority religious expression by making it illegal to convert, or attempt to convert, members of another faith. In practice, Christians and Muslims are the ones charged under these laws. Acts as innocuous as talking about heaven or offering snacks after a church service fall afoul of the laws, with enhanced sentences mandated in cases involving more than one person, a woman, a child, or a member of the many protected ethnic or caste communities. Other legal barriers, like those barring Christians and Muslims from social welfare schemes, also serve to chill religious freedom.

Socially, Hindu nationalism restricts freedom

across India by fueling mob violence against Christians and Muslims. This report considers the recent outbreak of violence against Christians in Chhattisgarh and the ongoing ethnoreligious violence happening in Manipur. Both instances are instructive not only to the state of religious freedom in India but the Indian government's lackluster response and its refusal to extend substantive protections to its religious minority population.

This report also suggests several policy recommendations to the U.S. government which has, for decades, taken a soft line with the Indian government on human rights. Its priority, it would seem, is to woo what it considers to be an important geopolitical ally in its fight against growing Chinese global influence around the world. Though the U.S. does highlight India's religious freedom issues on occasion, it is not consistent in its messaging and has thus far chosen to avoid the most potent tools at its disposal.

INTRODUCTION

India is located at a critical geographic, economic, and political meeting point. Physically, it lies between East Asia and the valuable European and Middle Eastern markets. Its vast workforce has become a valuable international commodity, making up a significant portion of the USD 650 billion of goods and services India exported in the year 2021-2022. Politically, India touts its status as the world's most populous democracy as it pushes to grow its influence on the international stage.

Yet at the same time, India faces constant accusations of democratic backsliding and a worsening rights landscape that could threaten its growing influence abroad and make it a geopolitical liability.

This report considers the deteriorating state of religious freedom in India, particularly as the situation has developed under current Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Since taking office in 2014, Modi has led India in a starkly nationalistic direction, quashing the rights of Muslims, Christians, and other religious minorities as he promotes a narrow view of India as a Hindu state — a view anathema to India's founders, who established the country as a secular state in 1947.

India is now the world's most populous country, having passed China in early 2023. Of its 1.4 billion citizens, some 80%, or 1.1 billion, are registered as Hindu. About 14%, or 200 million, Indians are Muslim while the Christian population, officially, comes in at 2.3% with 32 million adherents, though various social and legal barriers to conversion discussed below may skew these numbers in favor of the Hindu majority. The extent to which this

phenomenon impacts the overall numbers is not exactly known, but Christian leaders in India estimate that about an additional 140 million Indians are secretly Christians.

Under Modi's leadership, several states have promulgated discriminatory laws limiting religious expression and emboldening mobs to attack peaceful worshippers without consequence. Currently, 12 states across India criminalize religious conversion in a growing legal practice that stifles religious freedom everywhere it has been enacted. The justice system has become skewed to the point that victims of mob violence are now charged more often than the attackers, who go as far as to livestream their violent sprees on social media.

In 2014, the year Modi took office, there were 144 recorded incidents of religious violence in India, according to civil society leaders. In 2022, there were over 600 incidents, and 2023 is trending similarly. The majority of India's anti-conversion laws are new since 2014 and have contributed to the violence, emboldening mobs to attack peaceful Christian and Muslim gatherings on the pretext that these gatherings may induce Hindus to change their religion.

Even as the situation for religious minorities in India worsens, the United States continues to court India as a political and economic ally. While this may be a worthy goal, the United States should lead the international community in censuring India for its anti-minority policies and must work with India to ensure that every community can worship as they see fit. However strategically located, India should not get a free pass on religious freedom.

THE RISE OF HINDU NATIONALISM

Modern U.S.-India relations became serious during the George W. Bush administration when the U.S. decided it needed India on its side if it was to effectively challenge China's growing economic and political influence. Imports from India to the U.S. grew 16% annually from 2002 to 2006, when President Bush visited the country, while exports from the U.S. to India grew roughly 25% per year in that same period, according to the U.S. International Trade Commission.

But even as economic ties between the countries deepened, another trend was also starting to take shape. Hindu nationalism, a movement underpinned by the radical Hindutva political philosophy, was spreading across the country, leading to violence against religious minorities deemed second-class citizens by Hindu fomenters.

INDIA'S SWING TOWARD HINDU NATIONALISM

Perhaps the most public of the fomenters driving Hindutva's rise in the early 2000s was Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat. A western state that shares a 500km-long border with Pakistan, Gujarat was the site of massive riots in 2002 that ended with thousands of casualties. Most of those killed or injured in the riots were Muslims, targeted because of their religion. Over 500 Muslim sacred sites were demolished in the violence, and the initial riots in February sparked additional incidents for at least a year after.

Throughout that time, Chief Minister Modi did little to stem the violence and made public comments that worsened the situation. In 2005, the U.S. Department of State determined that his actions

amounted to a severe violation of religious freedom, triggering the only known use of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to sanction a foreign official. That sanction was kept in place until 2014 when Modi became Prime Minister of India.

Though the Hindutva philosophy has rapidly gained popularity since 2000, its roots stretch back to the 1930s and 40s. There, Hindutva found inspiration from the German Nazi Party and the radically exclusionary policies that led to WWII. To Hindu nationalists, India is, at its core, Hindu, and members of any other faith deserve relegation to the second class. To be a true Indian, according to Hindutva, is to be Hindu.

The Hindutva philosophy owes much of its growth over the years to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, the ideological mother to a host of pro-Hindutva groups around India and the world. Founded in 1925, the RSS boasts the ruling BJP political party, of which Prime Minister Modi is a part, within its fold as well as the VHP, a transnational group classified by the CIA as a militant religious outfit for its long history of extreme religious intolerance.

With more than 6 million members around the world, the RSS is a significant source of Hindu radicalization globally.

Thanks to the RSS's influence and the spread of the Hindutva philosophy across India, mobs targeting Christians and Muslims around the country enjoy a large degree of impunity. According to a study conducted by a respected international human rights watchdog, which asked ICC to keep it anonymous given ongoing harassment from the Indian government, about 600 incidents of violence against Christians took place in 2022. In only 39 cases

were charges filed against the attackers, and in many of those cases, the charges were soon dropped. In contrast, legal charges were brought against the Christian victims in 103 cases.

As Hindu nationalism grows around India, its influence is felt at every level of society. In local communities around the country, religious minorities suffer at the hands of violent mobs whipped up by the BJP's antagonistic rhetoric. Many of these victims end up in the courts, not as plaintiffs seeking reparation but as defendants facing criminal charges for acts as simple as holding a prayer meeting. In parliament and at the highest levels of power, the rights of citizens are steadily being stripped away to make way for a radical view of India as a country of and for Hindus.

U.S.-INDIA RELATIONS

It is against this dire human rights backdrop that the U.S. has spent the last two decades aggressively courting India as a geopolitical ally in its fight against rising Chinese influence in the developing world and beyond. Still, India has proven to be a coy target of America's overtures. Despite growing trade between the countries, significant arms deals, and cooperation on topics ranging from the environment to counterterrorism, India still refers to the relationship as a "strategic partnership" — cool words to describe a relationship the U.S. considers indispensable.

Newly appointed Secretary of State Antony Blinken traveled to India in July of 2021 to strengthen the partnership and, as a State Department presser put it, "underscore cooperation on our shared priorities." In May of that year, Blinken commented that the U.S. and India were "working together on so many of the most important challenges of our time and ones that are having a profound impact on the lives of our citizens."

The U.S. does engage with India on human rights concerns, in bilateral discussions and through the publication of the annual International Religious Freedom Reports, which are consistently critical of the Indian government. Though these reports create a temporary uproar in the Indian press when published, they are quickly pushed aside in favor of more pressing matters, like trade.

This was the case in June 2023 when the U.S. hosted Modi for an official state visit — a rare honor for visiting heads of state and only the third such event in President Biden's two years in office. The International Religious Freedom Report had just been published a month before to the great disapproval of the Indian government, yet Modi's visit was pulled off with little attention at all to the issue of religious freedom and a great deal of fanfare around new bilateral trade agreements.

During his 2023 trip, Modi addressed a joint session of Congress and was feted at a White House state dinner. The visit came as tensions between the U.S. and China reached new highs, focusing the Biden administration on building an international coalition — of which India is a critical part — to combat Chinese influence around the world.

Following the visit, the United States and India released a joint statement "affirming a vision" of the two countries as "among the closest partners in the world — a partnership of democracies ... grounded in respect for human rights and shared principles of democracy, freedom, and the rule of law."

More hopeful than factual, the statement was not enough to recast a visit broadly criticized by human rights advocates and civil society leaders in India and the United States. The New York Times called Modi's visit a "temporary truce" in Biden's battle for democracy and human rights, citing the way Modi's administration has "cracked down on dissent and hounded opponents in a way

that has raised fears of an authoritarian turn not seen since India's slip into dictatorship in the 1970s."

Contrasting June's joint statement, the International Religious Freedom Report published by the Department of State in May reported that "attacks on members of religious minority communities, including killings, assaults, and intimidation, occurred in various states [across India] throughout the year." Further, the report discussed the issue of state-level laws that criminalize minority religious activity and highlighted "numerous reports during the year of violence by law enforcement authorities against members of religious minorities in multiple states."

Earlier in May, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) also raised concerns about persecution in India, saying that religious freedom conditions "continued to worsen" in the last year and recommending that the U.S. designate India as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for engaging in "systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom."

Though the Department of State has in its power the ability to designate India as a CPC or to include it on its Special Watch List (SWL), it has never done so. USCIRF recommended that India be added to the SWL in 2010, intensifying its call in 2020 when it downgraded India to a CPC recommendation. USCIRF has continued to call for a CPC designation in the three years since, pointing to the promotion and enforcement of religiously discriminatory policies at all levels of the Indian government "including laws targeting religious conversion, interfaith relationships, the wearing of hijabs, and cow slaughter, which negatively impact Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and Adivasis."

INDIAN RESPONSE

The Indian government, ever sensitive about its image abroad, responds with frustration when called out for its failing human rights record. Responding to the Department of State's 2023 report on religious freedom in India, the Indian government called the publication a "motivated and biased" analysis. "Regrettably, such reports continue to be based on misinformation and flawed understanding," said Arindam Bagchi, spokesman for India's Ministry of External Affairs.

Still, India seems to have found that the most effective response is to brush the issue under the rug. It, and Modi in particular, does not regularly engage on the issue publicly. So, it was surprising when Modi agreed to a press conference during his 2023 visit to Washington. Taking just two questions, the first came from the Wall Street Journal's Sabrina Siddiqui, who pressed Modi on India's human rights record and its stance toward minorities.

"Democracy is in our DNA," Modi said in response. "We have always proved that democracy can deliver, and when I say deliver, this is regardless of caste, creed, religion, or gender. There is absolutely no space for discrimination [in India] ... this is our foundational principle."

Modi's claim, some analysts pointed out, was correct as far as democracy and inclusiveness were at the core of India's founding. What Modi failed to mention, however, was that he is leading the charge to erode those freedoms and close India, legally and socially, to non-Hindus.

LEGAL CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Despite Modi's protestations to the contrary, the Indian legal system presents many challenges to religious minorities. Ranging from laws that dampen the rights of citizens broadly — the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act has suppressed citizens' ability to criticize Modi and the BJP agenda — to laws like the Scheduled Caste Order that specifically favor Hinduism over Christianity and Islam, the government is increasingly leveraging India's legal system to disadvantage those that disagree with the Hindutva philosophy.

SCHEDULED CASTE BENEFITS

Under a 1950 order establishing the Scheduled Caste social welfare system, Christian and Muslim Indians from low-caste backgrounds are barred from receiving government benefits otherwise available to them if they were Hindus. The Scheduled Caste system is a vital lifeline to many indigent Indians who require the assistance for daily sustenance.

"No person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion," the order reads, "shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste." Later amendments added Sikhs and Buddhists to the list of favored religions, creating a legal hierarchy among religions and notably disadvantaging Muslims and Christians, respectively the country's second- and third-largest religious groups.

In his 2023 Washington press conference, Modi denied this barrier to conversion. "The benefits provided by the government are accessible to all," he claimed. "Those benefits are available to everybody. In India's democratic values, there is absolutely no discrimination on the basis of caste or creed."

This legal structure presents a significant obstacle to conversion from Hinduism, as many individuals depend on these benefits for their survival. Civil society leaders in India estimate that this barrier prevents tens of millions of Christians and Muslims from declaring their real faith publicly when doing so would mean losing their jobs and the other benefits that come with Scheduled Caste status.

These Christians and Muslims are forced to worship in secret, making every effort to hide their real faith identity from hostile government officials with the authority to seize their benefits. Unfortunately, this often proves impossible. Whether through clothing identifying the wearer as Muslim or names identifying the bearer as Christian, government officials regularly identify and cut these religious minorities off from their benefits.

In a 2023 case, the daughter of a Dalit-background ICC contact in India was cut off from her Scheduled Caste benefits when an official reviewing her university paperwork noticed that her father's given name was from the Bible. When ICC traveled in India to research for this report, it found that cases like this abound across the country.

Retaining access to Scheduled Caste benefits is a nonnegotiable for many poor Indians. Poverty is endemic in many areas, particularly among traditionally Dalit communities. A full third of Indian children under the age of 5 years are underweight, according to the CIA World Factbook, putting India third in the world for the percentage of underweight children — better only than Yemen and Timor-Leste.

While Modi was in Washington denying the religious barrier to Scheduled Caste benefits, the Indian Supreme Court was reviewing a case challenging the discriminatory practice. Two

months earlier, in April 2023, the court announced that it would accept a case challenging the 1950 provision, noting that the issue has been pending for decades and should be decided upon regardless of the political winds of the day.

Though the Supreme Court should be commended for its willingness to take on the case, it has not been known in recent years for rigorous adherence to constitutional rights or the rule of law in the face of BJP-led Hindu nationalistic pressure. In 2019, the court made international headlines for allowing a Hindu temple to be built on the site of a 16th-century mosque that was demolished by radical Hindus in 1992. Again in recent years, the court has refused to reverse the explosive Citizenship Amendment Act, a law that brazenly discriminates against Muslims.

With national elections looming in early 2024, the pressure on the court from Hindu nationalists, including Prime Minister Modi, will be enormous. A victory for their cause — the continued exclusion of Christians and Muslims from Scheduled Caste Benefits — would significantly boost the nationalist BJP, while defeat could stir up its radicalized voter base even more. Either way, the timing of the case cannot help but play a role in the upcoming elections.

ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

The right to convert from one religion to another enjoys strong protection under international human rights law. Articles 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) both make this right explicit, enshrining conversion as a core element of what it means to live freely.

In its extrapolative interpretation of ICCPR Article 18, the UN Human Rights Committee in 1993 explicitly addressed the question of limits on the right to convert. "Article 18," General Comment 22 reads, "does not permit any limitations whatsoever on the freedom of thought and conscience or on the freedom to have or adopt a religion or belief of one's choice. These freedoms are protected unconditionally ... including the right to replace one's current religion or belief with another."

All three documents — the UDHR, the ICCPR, and General Comment 22 — importantly protect the right to practice and share one's faith with others. As the ICCPR puts it, religious freedom includes the freedom "to manifest [one's] religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching."

Unfortunately, 12 of India's 28 states — Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh — maintain laws in direct contravention of these protections.

Written under the guise of protecting citizens from coercion — something that ICCPR Article 18.2 and General Comment 22 already prohibit — these laws criminalize conversions so broadly as to outlaw nearly all minority religious activity.

In a typical example, Uttar Pradesh's anti-conversion law outlaws "conversion from one religion to another by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means." Though international law would back this law up regarding its prohibition of force, the law's definition of allurement is crippling broad and itself in tension with international law.

Under the Uttar Pradesh law, allurement "includes the offer of any temptation," including "gratification, easy money ... free education in [a] reputed school run by any religious body ...

better lifestyle, [or] divine displeasure.” Under this definition, any religious activity could be considered an attempt at forced conversion. Even something as innocuous as explaining one’s view of divine pleasure and eternal reward is criminal under the statute.

While these laws have their roots in an early post-colonial India afraid of Western colonists forcing their religion on Hindu Indians, the laws continue to spread decades later under the Modi administration — which began in 2014 — revealing that the concern behind these laws is less with colonists and more with preserving the Hindu-dominated status quo.

In his March 2023 update on India’s anti-conversion laws, Luke Wilson, a researcher for the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, writes that “India’s enforcement of state-level anti-conversion laws suggests the legislations’ intent is to prevent conversions to disfavored religions — such as Christianity and Islam — and not to protect against coerced conversions.”

ICC regularly sees how these anti-conversion laws make minority religious life in India difficult and works with many pastors attacked by mobs during service because the singing and worship could lead a Hindu to convert to Christianity. Similar mob raids happen outside of church services as well, sometimes targeting church community outreach programs like food or clothing distributions.

CASE STUDY: UTTAR PRADESH

As referenced above, Uttar Pradesh is one of the 12 Indian states which maintains an anti-conversion law. Though it is one of the more recent entrants to the list, it has quickly become one of the most concerning areas in India regarding the enforcement of the law and overall violence toward religious minorities.

Leading Uttar Pradesh’s government is Yogi Adityanath, Chief Minister of the state since 2017 when he was appointed by the BJP-led government and sworn in at a ceremony featuring Modi and other prominent figures in India’s Hindu nationalist movement.

A prominent political figure, Adityanath was the youngest member of the Lok Sabha when he was elected in 1998. In the decades since, Adityanath has become a central figure in the Hindutva political movement. As Chief Minister of India’s most populous state, Adityanath wields considerable influence in the Indian political scene. He has even gone as far as to establish his own radicalized political base separate from the BJP, which he uses to threaten the BJP into ever more radical Hindu nationalism when he perceives them as being soft on the Hindutva philosophy.

Adityanath is not blind to his influence and does not shy away from explaining his desire for Hindu hegemony in India. “When I speak, thousands listen,” he told the gathered crowd at a 2009 rally. He was then a member of the Lok Sabha, India’s lower house of parliament. “When I ask them to rise and protect our Hindu culture, they obey. If I ask for blood, they will give me blood. I will not stop until I turn Uttar Pradesh and India into a Hindu Rashtra.”

The idea of a Hindu Rashtra, a popular rallying cry of Hindu nationalists, envisions an India where radical Hinduism reigns supreme and religious minorities are relegated to the farthest corners of society if allowed to remain at all. The concept bears comparison to the similarly exclusive idea of an Islamic caliphate.

In a 2015 speech, Adityanath declared that those who did not practice yoga “should leave India’s land,” further elaborating that

“they have no right to use the sunlight anymore. Those who do not subscribe to Surya Namaskar should sink in the sea or live in a dark room.” Surya Namaskar is a series of yoga poses.

Uttar Pradesh’s anti-conversion law was approved by the Council of Ministers, headed by Adityanath, and the governor in 2020 as an ordinance and passed by the state legislature as a law in 2021. Officially called the “Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Law,” the legislation not only outlines an extraordinarily expansive definition of forced conversion but includes enhanced sentences for a broad array of conversion scenarios.

These enhanced sentences increase the minimum fine from ₹15,000 or approximately \$180 to ₹25,000, equivalent to slightly over \$300. More importantly, the enhancements increase the maximum period of imprisonment from five to ten years — past the seven-year mark at which an offense becomes unbailable, meaning that the accused now sit in jail for weeks or months, unable to post bail and unattended to by India’s backlogged judicial system. In practice, though, those accused under the anti-conversion law are rarely offered bail, regardless of whether they face enhanced charges or not.

The criteria for enhanced charges under the Uttar Pradesh anti-conversion law include anyone who converts or attempts to convert a woman, a minor, a member of a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, or who conducts or attempts to conduct a so-called mass conversion. A “mass conversion” under Uttar Pradesh law includes any instance in which two or more persons are converted. Under this definition, an attempt at mass conversion would include sharing one’s faith with an audience greater than one.

In essence, the law prohibits speaking about one’s faith except one-on-one with an adult man not of a Scheduled Caste or Tribe. Even then, the law’s expansive definition of allurement would criminalize the conversation if it included any mention of heaven, divine wrath, or earthly gratification.

Still, the law should not be construed as a broad restriction on all religions. After all, it was written to restrict Christians and Muslims specifically, not the spread of Hinduism. “If a Hindu becomes a Muslim or a Christian, it is conversion, but if a Muslim or a Christian returns to Hinduism, then it is homecoming,” Adityanath once explained in an interview. “We should all support such homecomings because the person is then getting his national identity.”

In a recent investigative trip to India, ICC staff visited Uttar Pradesh and spoke with religious leaders and civil society actors who testified that Uttar Pradesh’s anti-conversion law has emboldened radical mobs, imbuing them with a sense of legal backing when carrying out their attacks on churches and pastors.

Indeed, attackers have been known to livestream their attacks on social media and often involve the police who, in 93.5% of cases across India fail to file charges against the attackers. According to civil society leaders who track this information in databases, 600 incidents of violence against Christians occurred in 2022. In only 39 cases did authorities file a First Information Report (official charges) against the attackers. In 103 incidents they filed a First Information Report against the Christian victim, many of which included accusations of conducting or attempting to conduct forced conversions.

Interestingly, despite thousands of charges filed against Christians and Muslims on charges of forced conversion since the

first anti-conversion law in 1967, only a single person has ever been convicted. Though few details are known about the case, the conviction happened in early 2023 and involved a Muslim individual. In every other case, the accused has been acquitted after spending weeks or months in jail. Still, the charges continue.

The pressure created by Uttar Pradesh's anti-conversion law has forced over a thousand churches to close since the law was passed, according to religious leaders in the state.

MOB VIOLENCE

Historically, religious violence against Christians in India tends to take the form of isolated mobs targeting individual churches or pastors. Hundreds of incidents a year bear this pattern out. In 2014, the year Modi took office, there were 144 recorded incidents of religious violence according to civil society leaders in India. By 2019 that number had increased to 328. Reduced social interactions due to COVID lockdowns reduced that number to 280 in 2020, but violence against Christians increased again in 2021 with a record 505 incidents, according to civil society leaders in India. In 2022 there were over 600 incidents and 2023 is trending similarly with over 300 incidents in the first five months of the year.

ICC AT WORK

In February of 2023, approximately twenty radical Hindu nationalists attacked a local church in Uttar Pradesh during Sunday worship. Around 250 Christians were present in the church during the attack. The police arrived soon after, but the attack continued for another hour before any action was taken.

After the attack was quelled, sixteen Christians, including the lead pastor, were taken to the police station for interrogation. Due to pressure from the radical Hindu nationalists, the police registered a First Information Report under sections 3 and 5 of the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Act 2021 against the Christians.

In the end, six of the Christians were jailed and later released on bail. These cases typically go on for months, allowing radical Hindus, the police, and local media to harass the Christians facing charges. Police regularly visit or summon them to the police station. Daily harassment and crippling expenses to fight the case leave these Christians in a vulnerable state.

ICC came to know about the incident through local sources. Soon after, it deployed a team to meet the needs of the affected families. Food packages and financial aid for the cases were given to the pastor and distributed to the victims.

"This incident of persecution led to huge setbacks in terms of our daily routines, particularly our ability to earn livelihoods," the lead pastor told ICC's team. "On behalf of all five families, I would like to thank the ICC team for being so gracious and providing for our needs. We are ever grateful for the gesture shown to us. We have seen faith live on through the help we received."

ICC staffers briefly ventured into Uttar Pradesh during their recent visit to India to speak with one pastor who has experienced the persecution in Uttar Pradesh firsthand. "It's very hard to live as a Christian in Uttar Pradesh," the pastor told ICC. "Adityanath and Modi are working together to make India a Hindu nation." The pastor volunteers as a trainer for ICC, helping equip other pastors in the state to avoid and respond to persecution.

India's Muslim community has traditionally seen fewer but much larger incidents, perhaps most famously the monthlong violence against Muslims in Gujarat under then Gujarati Chief Minister Modi's watch, which resulted in thousands of Muslim deaths and the destruction of over 500 Muslim sacred sites.

In 2022 and 2023, however, this pattern has begun to break down. Large-scale, sustained violence against the Christian community in Chhattisgarh displaced thousands beginning in November 2022. Hundreds of homes belonging to Indian Christians were vandalized along with at least a dozen churches that ICC was able to verify. In May 2023, violence broke out in Manipur along a complex mixture of ethnic and religious fault lines. Though the violence in Manipur is largely ethnic, religious differences between the main ethnic groups involved have inflamed tensions as shown in the targeting of hundreds of churches and dozens of temples.

CASE STUDY: CHHATTISGARH

In November 2023, news of large-scale anti-Christian riots began to leak out of India. Located in the central state of Chhattisgarh, the riots were particularly violent in the Narayanpur and Kondagaom districts of the state. There, rioters displaced at least 2,500 Christians, damaged massive amounts of property, vandalized hundreds of Christian homes, and ransacked at least a dozen church buildings, according to information ICC was able to verify through its contacts and visits to the area.

Chhattisgarh is one of the 12 Indian states to have an anti-conversion law and has seen an escalation of violent attacks against Christians in recent years.

Hundreds of Christians were forced to take shelter in temporary relief camps which the government closed in March of 2023. Other internally displaced people took refuge in informal, self-organized refugee camps.

As of this writing, many are still unable to return to their home villages due to life-threatening conditions prevailing in certain villages across Narayanpur and Kondagaom. Others, though, have returned to their homes out of necessity to plant their fields. Many of the displaced people are farmers and must plant their crops despite the danger.

ICC staff and their sources close to the situation can confirm that the following attacks took place across the state:

- In Cherang village, a violent mob assaulted 50 people and evicted them from their homes.
- In Temrugaon village, a mob attacked Christians and threw them out of the village.
- In Chimdi village, the houses of 20 believers were ransacked, a church was demolished, and 25 people were injured.
- Many Christians were attacked in Bhatpal village while other Christians in the village were threatened and forced to convert back to Hinduism.
- In Borwand village, nationalist mobsters assaulted

- Christians and stole their belongings.
- The Church of Lachhu Karanga in Borpal village was vandalized and items were stolen.
- Believers were assaulted in Modenga village.
- Christians were thrown out of Palna village.
- Christians were assaulted in Gohda, Aamasara, and Modenga villages.
- Believers were attacked in Kongera village. Four were admitted to Kondagaon Hospital.
- In Manipur village, a radicalized mob evicted and assaulted 2 Christian brothers.
- Christians were assaulted in Kibai Balenga village and admitted to the district hospital in Kondagaon.
- In Puswal village, Christians were assaulted and a church was vandalized.
- In Mundpal village of Farsgaon, 4 Christian families were attacked and their houses ransacked.
- Christians of Kokdi village were attacked and admitted to Kondagaon district hospital.
- One Christian family was evicted from Kulhad village.
- Three Christian families of Khargaon were chased away.
- A church in Shantinagar in Narayanpur district was attacked.

ICC has committed to helping rebuild the lives of the affected Christians in Chhattisgarh. Already, ICC staff have visited the area to document and assess the needs of the people there. The destruction in some areas was so thorough that, in addition to food aid, villagers requested pots and pans to cook with because the mob had looted or destroyed theirs.

ICC AT WORK

The rioters looted Christian homes and destroyed houses and goods, including seeds they stored for cultivation during the monsoon season. In addition to losing their houses and possessions, these Christian farmers, who are solely dependent on their crops, were now in a position to lose their livelihoods.

Seeing their need, ICC stepped in to provide seed and equipment to the families of 26 farmers before the monsoon season. Fortunately, the farmers were able to plant the seeds in time and thus restart their businesses.

“Our church building has been demolished,” one beneficiary told ICC. “Because of the violence, believers had not been allowed to harvest their crops. They are in a crisis of seeds and fertilizers. They are facing greater problems for farm products.”

Timing was critical in this relief project, given the impending monsoon season. “In such situations at such time, ICC ministry came and provided the needful products. Having received the seeds and fertilizers on time, believers are so happy. We thank God and the organization of ICC for providing the seeds.”

Another believer, speaking with ICC, revealed that his community was facing legal pressure in addition to the riots. “Many sections of Indian penal code have been imposed on us,” he said. “In this time of persecution and need, God has done a great work for believers by providing seeds and fertilizers through ICC. We extend our gratitude toward ICC for providing the farm products for violence-affected farmers.”

“No worship service on Sunday is taking place in the villages of Narayanpur and Kondagaon districts,” a local Christian leader told ICC. “Christians are traumatized and constantly living under fear and intimidation. Their survival is looking very grim on the ground; they need prayers and a helping hand.”

A gathering mob chased away one ICC source from the scene of a church attack. Though he is a native Indian, radical locals discovered that he was an outsider and threatened his safety to the point that he was forced to run to his car and escape the area.

Despite the ongoing threat of roving radical mobs, Christians are gradually returning to their villages and picking up the pieces of their lives. Others, however, are hesitant to return out of fear of more deadly attacks. Amid such destruction and displacement, many are concerned about where they will find their next meal.

ICC traveled to Chhattisgarh to interview the Christians who had returned. Their stories were fraught with trauma, living testimonies of the danger radical Hindu nationalism poses to religious minorities in India.

“They would have killed me and my family had I not fled to the jungle,” one pastor told ICC. “The phone call that I received from my friend saved my life ... he alerted me about the furious mob that was advancing toward our village carrying sharp weapons and sticks.” Pastor Kanan survived the attack by fleeing through the jungle to his uncle’s house. He was among about 200 Christians who fled the village on New Year’s Day when they were alerted that a mob of roughly 700 Hindu radicals was posed to descend.

Survivors report that the radical mobs sometimes forced Christians to convert to Hinduism. Though clearly a violation of human rights, the perpetrators of the forced conversions are unlikely to be prosecuted under Chhattisgarh’s law prohibiting forced conversions since these laws are designed to prevent conversion from Hinduism rather than conversions to Hinduism. The latter is considered by Hindu radicals to be a “reconversion” or “homecoming” and thus something to be celebrated and encouraged rather than critiqued.

Chhattisgarh is, unfortunately, no stranger to religious violence. Though the recent attacks are the largest to date, religious minorities in Chhattisgarh have long suffered from religious violence. ICC has worked in the state for years, helping those impacted by the violence to recover from their injuries and rebuild their lives after the trauma of mob violence.

CASE STUDY: MANIPUR

The far eastern Indian state of Manipur does not often feature in international headlines. Located over 2,000km from New Delhi in a rugged jungle region bordering Myanmar, the world has largely ignored its long history of ethnic and religious tensions. Manipur has been enveloped in ethno-religious violence since May 3, 2023, when a peaceful Kuki student protest was attacked by Meiti fomenters who burned an important Kuki cultural site as well as numerous homes and churches.

Though the violence is largely ethnic, religious differences between the main ethnic groups involved have inflamed tensions as demonstrated in the targeting of places of worship.

Reliable information is scarce due to the lack of internet access in the region. Still, ICC sources and others suggest that 200-400 Christian churches, including at least two dozen Meiti churches, and some dozens of temples have been destroyed along with over 3,500 houses. The ongoing violence has displaced tens of thousands.

The Meitei people, who constitute the slight majority of Manipur’s population and are overwhelmingly Hindu, mostly live in the valley areas of Manipur while the Kuki, most of whom

are Christians, are concentrated in hill areas set aside for them as an indigenous tribal group, or Scheduled Tribe, a historical designation. Early reports indicate that Meitei attackers have destroyed dozens of Meitei churches, suggesting that Meitei mobs and militias are targeting communities based not only on their ethnicity but also on religion.

The immediate cause of the current unrest lies in a recommendation made by the Manipur High Court that the executive branch of the state government make the majority Meitei people eligible for Scheduled Tribe benefits, including access to land traditionally reserved for the minority Kuki community and other indigenous tribes. The Meitei have been pushing for this for over a decade, but they have never before been considered an indigenous tribe and have not traditionally sought Scheduled Tribe status given the social stigmas associated with that designation.

In response to the court's recommendation, Kuki youth and youth from other indigenous tribes protested. Meitei attackers responded violently to the protests, sparking widespread unrest from both sides that continues to this day.

As it has in other areas undergoing unrest, the Indian government quickly blocked internet access in Manipur to control the flow of information throughout the area. While this may make it more difficult for attackers to coordinate with each other, it also makes it nearly impossible to obtain verified information from the area. Still, the widespread destruction of houses of worship is well accepted and illustrates the complex nature of a conflict too easily simplified into purely ethnic terms.

In July, a video emerged showing two Kuki women stripped naked and being paraded about by a crowd reportedly composed of 800-1,000 Meitei men. Eyewitnesses of the incident, which happened during the second day of violence on May 4, say

that the mob violently assaulted, gang raped, and then left the two women along with another not pictured. All three women survived, although the mob killed at least two male relatives in the same incident.

The two-month gap between the incident and the video going viral is due to the Indian government's draconian internet lockdown in the region, a common practice by the government in troubled areas and one that has drawn international condemnation.

Famously taciturn with the media and known for refusing to comment on major situations in the country, Modi finally addressed the issue in Manipur on July 20, several days after the video began spreading. Speaking before the opening of the monsoon session of the Indian parliament, Modi called the May 4 gang rape a "shameful incident" and one that reflected poorly on the whole country.

"I want to assure the nation, no guilty [people] will be spared," he told gathered reporters, according to the Guardian. "Action will be taken according to the law. What happened to the daughters of Manipur can never be forgiven. As I stand next to this temple of democracy, my heart is filled with pain and anger."

Still, Modi did not address the religious component of the violence or speak to any substantive solutions to the crisis. After his remarks, opposition politicians brought a rare no-confidence vote against Modi in the Lok Sabha. With the BJP holding 301 seats in the 542-member lower house, the vote stood no chance of challenging Modi's leadership. Instead, it was an opportunity to force debate about the issue in Manipur, which is led by the BJP.

A long-term solution to the violence in Manipur must do more than quell the immediate violence — it must address the root issues at stake, including religious tensions where applicable. Though religion is not the only issue at play, it is a serious one and cannot afford to be ignored moving forward.

U.S. POLICY STANCE

The Biden administration may need India now more than ever, but America has been courting India for decades. The Trump administration also worked to deepen ties with Modi's government, including through high-profile visits to New Delhi and a large rally for Modi in Houston in 2019. Indeed, consecutive administrations since George W. Bush's have seemingly sought to outdo each other in deepening trade and defense ties with India on the theory that, given its size and proximity to China, India is indispensable in the great power conflict between the U.S. and rivals China and Russia.

INDIA A FICKLE PARTNER

Some experts believe that Washington's hopeful dependence on India as an ally in its conflict with China is misplaced, pointing to India's support for Russia during the ongoing war against Ukraine and its overarching foreign policy of nonaligned self-interest. In the year since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Modi oversaw an elevenfold increase in imports of Russian oil, defying U.S. demands and extending a vital economic lifeline to the Russian war effort. The move has placed a strain on U.S.-India relations but did not seem to dampen the mood during Modi's 2023 state visit to Washington.

"New Delhi will never involve itself in any U.S. confrontation with Beijing that does not directly threaten its own security,"

Ashley Tellis, a leading expert on U.S.-India relations, wrote in Foreign Affairs leading up to Modi's state visit. "India values cooperation with Washington for the tangible benefits it brings but does not believe that it must, in turn, materially support the United States in any crisis."

Tellis' words were soon backed up when, just weeks after the visit to Washington, Modi hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin for a virtual meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a security summit. Other attendees included Belarus, which plans to join the bloc in 2024, and Iran which was welcomed into the SCO's ranks in 2022.

The SCO, which includes not only India and Russia but Pakistan and several Central Asian countries, is a prime forum for Chinese influence across the region and a cause of concern for U.S. officials trying to counter Chinese authoritarianism. India's participation in the forum was a conspicuous reminder of the multipolar world order envisioned by India in which it chooses partners based on limited self-interest rather than the traditional geopolitical fault lines dividing Western states from countries like Russia and China.

Modi also visited longtime Egyptian dictator Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2023, flying directly to the meeting in Cairo from his trip to Washington. Egypt has a long history of human rights violations, including the persecution of Christians and other religious minorities.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The U.S. and its allies must take a firmer line on India's human rights and religious freedom record, starting with consistent messaging on the issue. Working with India out of geopolitical necessity is one matter, but ignoring its deteriorating human rights record is another.

Though its domestic stance is unapologetically against religious minorities, India's BJP-led government is sensitive to its international image, as it reminds the world every time the U.S. criticizes it for its failing human rights record.

Findings such as those published in the Department of State's annual International Religious Freedom Report and by USCIRF are an important part of U.S. engagement with India on the religious freedom issue. These reports consistently find that religious freedom has deteriorated under Modi's rule and continues to do so year after year. Such documentation is valuable as a tool of international pressure and a foundation on which to base further diplomatic engagement with India.

American diplomats and State Department officials have assured ICC through the years that they do, indeed, raise the issue of religious freedom with their counterparts in the Indian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and beyond. This kind of consistent, bilateral messaging is a critical component of the U.S. response and deserves to be praised to the extent that it has been used to advance religious freedom in India.

Unfortunately, though, this type of engagement is often limited to private, closed-door meetings that have not stemmed the tide of pro-Hindutva sentiment growing in the Indian government.

While reports and personal diplomatic engagement on the topic are important tools, the U.S. has thus far decided to forgo use of the most targeted tool at its disposal — designating India as a CPC. This designation, created by the International Religious Freedom Act, is a serious marker of diplomatic disapproval for countries engaging in particularly egregious violations of religious freedom and carries with it the threat of sanctions, though these are typically waived.

USCIRF has recommended that the Department of State, which manages the CPC designation, list India as a CPC every year since 2020. Previously, from 2010-2019, it had recommended that India be designated on the Special Watchlist, a less severe designation but one that still carries significant diplomatic weight. The Department of State has taken no action on USCIRF's recommendations, leaving India off both lists in the 25 years it has been tasked with managing the designations.

ICC joins USCIRF and a host of India-focused human rights

watchdogs in urging the Department of State to designate India a CPC.

In addition to CPC status, the U.S. should be more consistent in its messaging on India. In a press briefing leading up to Modi's 2023 state visit, U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan assured the media that the U.S. would not "lecture" India on its failings "or assert that we don't have challenges ourselves," according to a Reuters report. His comments suggested that the U.S. will continue to take a tentative approach to the issue of democracy and human rights in India, much to the disappointment of advocates who have been raising the issues for years.

Such comments are commonplace as consecutive U.S. administrations pander to an India it views as a critical geopolitical ally. Calling the relationship with India "a partnership that is among the most consequential in the world," President Biden's only mention of religion at a joint press with Modi in 2023 was to highlight how Indian Americans of various faiths enjoy freedom in America.

Biden's remarks at the press conference mostly focused on economic cooperation between the two countries and the supposed shared commitment between the two countries to ensure that "people everywhere have the opportunity to live in dignity." That the religious minorities of India are too often not afforded that opportunity did not make Biden's talking points and does not seem to be top of mind for any U.S. administration.

America has a key role to play in advancing human rights around the world. Central to the American political experience and core to human rights is the right to follow one's conscience freely. In India, this freedom is under serious attack. The U.S. should use its influence in India, which is significant no matter how much the Indian government would like to deny it, to protect the rights of vulnerable religious minorities and help them to live in peace and harmony with the majority population.

Though it has experienced significant democratic backsliding in recent years, India is still a democracy. Lasting change, then, must include the hearts and minds of the people who keep Modi in office and respond to his nationalist rallying cry.

It will take time to change the minds of a majority population overwhelmingly in favor of oppressing their weaker neighbors, but there is no country in the world better positioned to encourage change in India than the United States. Rather than enabling a political and legal system driven by hate and marginalization, the U.S. should use the tools at its disposal to encourage the tolerance and inclusion India was founded on in 1947.

CONTACT: This report is published by International Christian Concern’s Advocacy department. If you would like to get in touch with ICC’s Advocacy department, please contact advocacy@persecution.org. All other inquiries, please contact icc@persecution.org.

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