

India Will Never Be Great Until It Protects Religious Freedom

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Five years ago, Narendra Modi's election victory sparked hope for an Indian economic renaissance. The world's second most populous nation would follow China's growth path, the experts said, and provide a democratic alternative to the repressive "Beijing Consensus." Modi was anointed the Indian Ronald Reagan.

However, Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have proven a great disappointment. Modi is more pro-business than he is free market. Worse, he believes in Hindu nationalism far more than capitalism, and has failed to combat the steady rise in religious intolerance. When younger, he was active in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, a paramilitary Hindu nationalist group. While heading the government of Gujarat state, he presided over the massacre of as many as 2,000 Muslims in a spasm of sectarian violence. His culpability was suspected but unproven, as key evidence disappeared.

Most importantly, over the last five years, he's done little to dissuade BJP-controlled states and BJP-inspired mobs from infringing on religious liberty and attacking minorities.

India has long ranked among the most dangerous nations for religious minorities. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's newly released 2019 report notes that Indian religious liberty "continued in a downward trend." A third of all states restricted religious conversion and/or trade in cattle; mobs targeted Christians (who tend to proselytize) and Muslims (who dominate the beef, dairy, and leather trades). USCIRF cites "the government's allowance and encouragement of mob violence against religious minorities—that have facilitated an egregious and ongoing campaign of violence, intimidation, and harassment against non-Hindu and lower-caste Hindu minorities." Warned the Commission, "India's history as a multicultural and multi-religious society remained threatened by an increasingly exclusionary conception of national identity based on religion."

The State Department notes the role of private vigilantism: "Religious minority communities felt increasingly vulnerable due to Hindu nationalist groups engaging in violence against non-Hindu individuals and their places of worship." Those involved in cattle businesses are at increasing risk. Human Rights Watch recently concluded: "Between May 2015 and December 2018, at least 44 people—36 of them Muslims—were killed across 12 Indian states. Over that same period, around 280 people were injured in over 100 different incidents across 20 states." Yet in many cases, the government failed to prosecute anyone, even murderers.

Christians make up a small percentage of the population, and thus account for a proportionately smaller share of casualties of religious intolerance. However, Hindu hostility is often virulent: a decade ago, mobs in the state of Orissa killed scores of Christians, causing tens of thousands of others to flee. Today, persecution is a violent constant.

Unfortunately, the latest legislative election has inflamed Hindu nationalism. The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India observes: “With general elections due in April-May 2019, attempts at religious polarization is at an all-time high. Hate speeches, sometimes even by Union Ministers have acted as a catalyst in the dividing of people among religious, ethnic, and even linguistic lines.” Extremists have targeted Dalits, once called untouchables (who deal in cattle and are especially receptive to the Gospel), religious minorities (particularly Muslims), and women. Moreover, noted the Commission, “The small Christian community, 2.3 percent of the 1.30 billion population, which seems to be targeted on issues of conversion, is also collateral victim of the hate crimes against the much larger Muslim community.”

Persecution is likely to increase irrespective of the election outcome. Most observers expect a coalition government led by the BJP. A weakened ruling party will likely increase its populist appeals. An opposition win might be no better. Although the Congress Party historically represented a secular India, the revived opposition has also begun to appeal to Hindu nationalists.

The Religious Liberty Commission recently published a report entitled “Hate and Targeted Violence Against Christians in India.” It makes for depressing reading: “Targeted violence and hate crimes against the Christian community in India continued unabated in 2018.” The organization recorded 325 incidents—up from 146 in 201, when the BJP took control—but warned that its list is not exhaustive: “Most cases go unreported either because the victim and witnesses are terrified, or the police, especially in the northern states, just turn a blind eye and refuse to record the mandatory First Information Report of the crime.”

The scariest statistic may be that there were 84 mob attacks, often including lynchings. The result last year was 60 dead and 102 injured. Most victims were Muslims or Dalits, but at least one Christian was murdered after purchasing beef. And these numbers merely aggregate incidents reported in the media. Almost certainly there were many more.

Nor do the numbers tell the entire story. The RLC notes that there has also been a “sudden spurt of violence in a few districts of Uttar Pradesh, the country’s most populous province, and in Tamil Nadu in the extreme south of the subcontinent.” Indeed, 40 percent of the events, 132, occurred in the former.

Uttar Pradesh is home to almost one fifth of the population. It is very dangerous for religious minorities. According to the RLC, the state “has had the most incidents (645) of communal (sectarian) violence in India over the last four years i.e. (2014-17) as well as the most deaths (121) in these communal incidents.” The number of attacks there dramatically escalated last fall.

Although much of the violence is committed by private individuals, the police often participate and frequently stoke popular hostility against Christians. Indeed, reports the RLC, “The state is currently led by Yogi Adityanath, who along with being the Chief Minister, is also the high priest of the Gorakhnath temple situated in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh. The Chief Minister is also the founder of the Hindu Yuva Vahini, a Hindu youth militia that has been involved in

communal violence and in targeting religious minorities.” It’s as though the grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan had served as governor of a Southern state during the Jim Crow era.

The focus of anti-Christian violence in Uttar Pradesh is on converts. The desire of Dalits, despised and mistreated by their own culture, to convert is an ongoing embarrassment for Hindu nationalists, a powerful repudiation of their faith.

In Uttar Pradesh, the media has maintained a misleading and systematic attack on Christians for allegedly winning converts through bribery, force, and fraud. Last year, these claims, according to the RLC, were “followed by police charges which was then followed by multiple area reports of disrupted worship meetings, pastors and evangelists arrested and Christian leaders fleeing their homes to avoid arrest.” The police joined with Hindu activists and “raided several churches in the district, interrogating the pastors and leaders” and “harassing the worshippers.” Ministers faced frequent violent attacks.

Physical violence against Christians across India are common, but believers also face other forms of mistreatment. Churches are destroyed, Christians are arrested, believers are falsely accused, conversions are forced, worship is disrupted, women are targeted, and believers suffer theft, vandalism, and boycotts.

There is no easy answer to the problem of religious persecution in India. The RLC advocates enforcing the law, punishing hate speech that incites violence, pressing state governments to confront violent organizations, listing religious minorities in the constitution, creating a human rights commission in every state, training police officers in human rights, and prosecuting those who fail to carry out their duties. It’s a good agenda but many of the politicians who must enact and enforce it are currently fomenting religious intolerance themselves.

Obviously, religious minorities suffer the most under the current system. However, Hindus too are victims. Occasionally this is because of physical violence by Muslims, but more often it’s because intolerance undermines social peace and prosperity for all. Rising persecution erodes the rule of law and democracy. Foreign investors are more likely to look elsewhere. A system dominated by violent hatemongers leaves most everyone worse off.

Much is at stake in the choices that Indian voters make. If Indian politicians want their nation to be great and influential, they need to respect the essential freedoms of conscience and faith.

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