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Indian Democracy Falters on Dark Path of Hindu Nationalism

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When Americans think of religious persecution, they typically think of communist and Islamist regimes — China and Saudi Arabia, for instance. However, one of the most intolerant societies is India, which is hailed as the world's most populous democracy and promoted as a bulwark against Beijing.

But the reality of India includes largely uncontrolled — and often state-encouraged — violence against religious minorities. Muslims, the most populous minority, are frequently targeted. Christians, a much smaller, more vulnerable group, are also brutally mistreated.

For instance, the *Washington Post* reported:

Since December, Hindu vigilantes in Chhattisgarh state in eastern India, enraged by the spread of Christianity and rallied by local political leaders, have assaulted and displaced hundreds of Christian converts in dozens of villages and left a trail of damaged churches, according to interviews with local Christians and activists and as seen during a recent trip to the area.

Although sectarian violence has long been a staple of Indian life, religious persecution has dramatically accelerated under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. He rose through the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, an influential paramilitary Hindu organization that promotes Hindutva, or Hindu supremacy. In 2002, when he served as the chief minister of Gujarat, he was blamed for not controlling — and even condoning — riots by Hindus that killed a thousand or more Muslims. His Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) gained a majority in the 2014 national poll and was subsequently reelected.

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Modi was originally seen as a pro-business leader akin to Ronald Reagan, committed to economic deregulation and growth, but he has been a disappointment in this. His policies have been much more *dirigiste* than predicted. Instead, he has gained political success and strengthened control of Indian politics by inflaming Hindu nationalism.

In its latest annual report, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found a significant deterioration in freedom of religion in India. The report explains:

[T]he Indian government escalated its promotion and enforcement of policies — including those promoting a Hindu-nationalist agenda — that negatively affect Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and other religious minorities. The government continued to systemize its ideological vision of a Hindu state at both the national and state levels through the use of both existing and new laws and structural changes hostile to the country’s religious minorities.

This hostility reflects conscious government policy. For instance, Meenakshi Ganguly, Human Rights Watch’s director for South Asia, explained, “The BJP government’s promotion of Hindu majoritarian ideology provokes authorities and supporters to engage in discriminatory and at times violent actions against religious minorities.”

The problems worsened last year when the “Indian authorities intensified and broadened their crackdown on activist groups and the media in 2022 ... The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government used abusive and discriminatory policies to repress Muslims and other minorities,” Ganguly wrote.

Late last year, the BJP even revived memories of the 2002 atrocity as a campaign tactic in Gujarat state elections. In discussing the Indian state of Chhattisgarh, the *Washington Post* noted that “the boogeyman has been the Christian.”

The recent violence was not sui generis. Rather, it illustrates “a broader truth about India today: that antipathy toward the Abrahamic religions of Islam and Christianity — often portrayed as alien religions brought to India by its historical invaders — can be wielded as an effective mobilizing force for political ends.”

The worst problems occur at the state level. USCIRF explains:

Government action, including the continued enforcement of anti-conversion laws against non-Hindus, has created a culture of impunity for nationwide campaigns of threats and violence by mobs and vigilante groups, including against Muslims and Christians accused of conversion activities. Anti-conversion laws have increasingly focused on interfaith relationships.

Hindu leaders, like many radical Islamists, fixate on conversions, as an increasing number of their coreligionists, especially low-status Dalits and tribal Adivasis, become Christians. A third of states now restrict conversions, seeking to prevent people from choosing their own faith. These laws are often enforced against Christians who share their faith. The U.S. State Department has referred to Christians who “were arrested in three states on suspicion of forceful or fraudulent religious conversions under the laws restricting religious conversions in those states.”

By the end of last year, more than 50 pastors had been imprisoned under anti-conversion laws in the state of Uttar Pradesh alone. A ministers' group seeking their freedom explained:

The hardcore nationalists groups and individuals disrupt Christian prayer gatherings, ransack churches and prayer halls, destroy copies of the Holy Bible and manhandle pastors, priests and nuns, by citing violations of the state's anti-conversion law.

The violence is mostly private, but, as in the case of Chhattisgarh cited earlier, local political leaders often stoke hatred and encourage attacks. Meanwhile, police, prosecutors, and judges stand by, condoning — or even encouraging — murder and mayhem. The problem is long-standing: In 2021, there were 75 violent assaults in Chhattisgarh. Similar violence occurs elsewhere.

Indeed, in that year, the Evangelical Fellowship of India's Religious Liberty Commission reported 505 violent incidents against Christians around the country:

No denomination whether organized or a lonely independent worshipping family or neighborhood group, none has been spared targeted violence and intense, chilling hate, the worst seen since the general election campaign of 2014. The year 2021 saw calls for genocide and threats of mass violence made from public platforms, and important political and religious figures on the stage.

Fifteen years ago, mob assaults rose to a fever pitch in the state of Orissa, killing scores of Christians and forcing tens of thousands to flee.

Setting India apart from even Islamic nations is the role of cattle as a flashpoint, with increasing violence against non-Hindus — especially Muslims — who dominate the beef market. USCIRF explained:

Violent attacks have been perpetrated across the country under the guise of protecting cows in line with India's constitution and laws in 20 states (and growing) criminalizing cow slaughter in various forms. Vigilante mobs, often organized over social media, have attacked religious minorities—including Muslims, Christians, and Dalits—under suspicion of eating beef, slaughtering cows, or transporting cattle for slaughter.

In one case, three Muslim men were lynched on suspicion of cow smuggling. In another, two men accused of the same offense were beaten — one to death. The problem has become so serious that Human Rights Watch issued a detailed report on the phenomenon four years ago.

New Delhi's ongoing democratic retrenchment — evident in the government's attempt to block viewing of a new BBC documentary on Modi's role in Gujarat — has intensified discrimination against and persecution of religious minorities. Today, Freedom House rates India only “partly free,” given increasing restrictions on civil liberties. The group explained:

The constitution guarantees civil liberties including freedom of expression and freedom of religion, but harassment of journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and other government critics has increased significantly under Modi.

USCIRF's conclusion was similar:

[T]he Indian government repressed critical voices — especially religious minorities and those reporting on and advocating for them — through harassment, investigation, detention, and prosecution under laws such as the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) and the Sedition Law. The UAPA and Sedition Law have been invoked to create an increasing climate of intimidation and fear in an effort to silence anyone speaking out against the government.

Indeed, India ranks just 150th of 180 nations when it comes to freedom of the press, according to the 2022 World Freedom Press Index. Simply *reporting* on religious persecution has become dangerous. According to Indian journalist Sabah Gurmat, “A growing number of journalists now face punitive action, including criminal cases as well as threats of violence and harassment.” He continued: “Nowhere is this threatening atmosphere more evident than among the reporters who cover religion, far-right Hindu nationalism and communal violence, which is on the rise in India today.” One of the victims was an 84-year-old Jesuit priest, Father Stan Swamy, a human rights activist arrested on dubious charges who died in government custody.

India has hit a crisis point. It has never been a truly liberal democracy, but it is slipping ever further toward an authoritarian state with periodic elections. Having solidified its hold on power, the Modi government could do a policy volte-face without serious political risk. Otherwise, it risks sacrificing the opportunity to match a struggling China economically and politically.

The Religious Liberty Commission offered several reform proposals: pass national legislation against communal violence, repeal laws that restrict religious freedom, enforce the law against violent sectarian and hate groups, educate police on religious liberty, prosecute those who fail to fulfill their duties, add Christians and Muslims to the constitution, maintain active commissions for human rights and minorities in every state, and prosecute all crimes against religious and tribal minorities and Dalits.

Alas, most of these reforms require the consent of the present government, which is a large part of the problem. Expecting its members to enact and enforce such a program when many of them are responsible for fomenting sectarian intolerance and violence is putting hope before experience.

Yet Hindus also suffer from attacks on religious minorities. Ultimately, lawlessness will not be confined to the few and vulnerable. The resort to violence inevitably erodes the rule of law and democratic norms. Moreover, increasing criminal attacks undermine domestic markets, threatening the economic growth so desired by India's poor. Foreign investors, with many overseas choices, are likely to seek alternative markets.

Narendra Modi has been celebrated as a strong leader of a new, global India. However, his tenure has been tainted by increasing authoritarianism and persecution. India risks tearing itself apart before it becomes the next great power.

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