



Indian Democracy Falters on Dark Path of Hindu Nationalism

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The increasing persecution of religious minorities, including Christians and Muslims, has awakened the attention of human rights organizations as well as those concerned for India's future as a global leader.

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, hailed as the world's most populous democracy and promoted as a bulwark against Beijing.

The reality, however, is largely uncontrolled and often state-encouraged violence against religious minorities. Muslims, the most populous minority, are frequently targeted. Christians, the more vulnerable group, are also brutally treated.

For instance, *as 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 long has been a staple of Indian life, religious persecution has 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 state, 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. He has strengthened his control of Indian politics by inflaming Hindu nationalism.

In its latest annual report, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) found a deterioration in religious freedom: “The 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 reflects conscious government policy. As Human Rights Watch's South Asia director, Meenakshi Ganguly, 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 BJP authorities "used abusive and discriminatory policies to repress Muslims and other minorities."

Late last year the BJP even revived memories of the 2002 atrocity as a campaign tactic in Gujarat state elections. In discussing Chhattisgarh, the *Post* noted that "the boogeyman has been the Christian." The recent violence was not sui generis, but rather, 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."

Indeed, the worst problems occur at the state level. According to USCIRF: "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 taken note of 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 reported "how the hardcore nationalist 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 hatreds and encourage attacks while 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 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."

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. As the

USCIRF reported: “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.

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, with increasing restrictions on civil liberties. For instance, as the USCIRF details: “The 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.”

In fact, India ranks just 150 of 180 nations when it comes to press freedom. Simply *reporting* on religious persecution has become dangerous. According to [Indian journalist Sabah Gurnat](#): “A growing number of journalists now face punitive action, including criminal cases as well as threats of violence and harassment. 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.

The Religious Liberty Commission [offered several reform proposals](#), including national legislation, but most require the consent of the present government, which is a large part of the problem. Yet Hindus also lose 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, growing violence threatens the economic growth that the Indian people need and demand. Foreign investors are likely to seek alternative markets.

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

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