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For years Britain shunned Narendra Modi. So why roll out the red carpet now?

The Guardian (10.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1PE7q64> - London is set to play host to one of the most dangerous politicians on the planet this week. Not that you'll hear any such thing when Narendra Modi arrives. Instead, we'll be reminded that India's prime minister is the leader of a giant and dynamic economy. That he's taking tea with the Queen and buddying up to David Cameron. There'll be fun Modi facts too: how he once sold chai at railway stations; how, aged 65, he boasts of having a 56-inch chest.

How can someone so Technicolor be so dangerous? Well, imagine any national leader – Cameron, Merkel, Obama – spending a large chunk of his or her life working for a gang of religious fascists – one that renowned academics compare to Islamic State. Chuck in a long personal history of inciting religious hostility, a track record of cosying up to big business, and a reputation for ruthlessness towards enemies. Now put this extremist in charge of a nuclear state. Worried yet?

That, in a nutshell, is the man who will be jetting into Britain. As a boy Modi joined the far-right Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), whose objective is to turn India – which gave the world Jainism and Buddhism and Sikhism, and which has the world's third-largest Muslim population – into a Hindu superpower. Among its alumni is Nathuram Godse, the fanatic who gunned down Mahatma Gandhi.

Religious extremism is not some long-faded part of Modi's past. In 2002, while he was chief minister for Gujarat, a train carriage carrying Hindu pilgrims caught fire in the state. Within hours, without a scrap of evidence, Modi blamed the 58 deaths on the Pakistani secret services, then paraded the charred corpses through the state capital of Ahmedabad.

His Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) called a three-day strike. There then followed one of the bloodiest anti-Muslim pogroms in modern history. Mobs of men dragged wives and daughters on to the streets to be raped. One ringleader later boasted of slitting open the womb of a pregnant woman. Between 1,000 and 2,000 people were killed – the vast majority Muslim.

Try as they might, BJP supporters cannot erase the history of these shameful killings or absolve their leader of responsibility. This version of events is not contested by any serious analyst – and at the very least it shows up Modi as a master of hate speech. Asked three years ago whether he felt any regret over the deaths of so many innocent people, the BJP leader replied that he felt the same pain as a passenger in a car that has just run over a puppy.

But this is all about to be consigned to the past. For years after the massacres Britain shunned Modi. But this week it will roll out the red carpet, even as the atmosphere of thuggish intolerance and violence around Modi grows thicker.

In September he took his cabinet to meet RSS leaders for a three-day summit, where ministers reported on their progress. The RSS has been having meetings with the education ministry to gain greater influence over the curriculum. In Modi's home state of Gujarat, schoolchildren are already given textbooks written by RSS affiliates.

Primary and secondary pupils are taught that, while television "was invented by a priest from Scotland called John Logie Baird", it was actually pioneered thousands of years ago, by Hindu royalty in ancient India. So, for that matter, was the motor car. And so was stem-cell research. These textbooks carry praising endorsements from Modi himself. It is as if the dad off Goodness Gracious Me – who claimed everything was invented in India – has been put in charge of an entire nation's syllabus.

The sad oddity of all this is that India can be genuinely proud of its traditional hospitality towards dissent. A subcontinent of a billion people, of glaciers and deserts, is naturally pluralistic. "There is not a thought that is being thought in the west or the east that is not active in some Indian mind," wrote the historian EP Thompson.

Yet Hindu extremists now force major publishers to pulp books they deem offensive. Campaign groups such as the Ford Foundation and Amnesty, whose work on human rights and the environment needle Modi's officials, are put under so much scrutiny that they can barely continue. An environmentalist invited by British MPs to testify on abuse by mining firms was yanked from her London flight just before take-off. And last Friday the Indian arm of Greenpeace was ordered by the authorities to shut down, on the flimsiest of pretexts.

Just as with the Gujarat pogrom, the prime minister has no direct part to play in any of this – rather he fosters the environment that makes it all possible. One incident from this September is typical. A Muslim villager is accused by a Hindu mob of eating beef and

lynched. The issue of beef slaughter is one that Modi campaigned on before his election. Now he keeps shtoom – even while his party colleagues issue justifications. Finally, an interview is given in which Modi voices the most watery regret.

By his rise to power, by his strategic silences, by his smirking apologies, Modi gives succour to the gathering mob. He was voted in on a ticket of reviving a moribund economy. Supporters pointed to the apparent success story of Gujarat. They didn't read the auditors' reports that showed how the development success of Gujarat lay in giving more money to the urban rich, in handing land and soft loans to the business houses.

Now that Modi is failing to turn around India, he and his generals fall back on the old trick of hunting for an enemy: Pakistan, religious minorities, pseudo-seculars. An environment now exists in which scholars who criticise Hindu idol worship receive death threats, and are then murdered. An intellectual who invites a former Pakistani minister to give a talk in Mumbai is nabbed by Hindu zealots and smeared with ink. Writers, academics and scientists return their national honours to Delhi in protest at the officially sponsored thuggishness.

Cash-strapped Cameron will never raise these issues with his guest. The permanent secretary at the Foreign Office admitted to MPs just a few weeks ago that human rights no longer count as a "top priority", and come below the government's "prosperity agenda".

Meanwhile, India's new leader hugs Mark Zuckerberg; he'll play to the proud Indian diaspora at Wembley Stadium this week; and rules with a giant mandate and an opposition in disarray. "This is the most dangerous leader India has had in 30 years," says one of the country's most acute observers, Mihir Sharma. "He reminds me of Putin: appealing to a glorious past, friend to the oligarchs and to a state religion, clamping down on dissent."

This is what real danger looks like nowadays: wearing a business suit and clutching trade deals – while silencing those who disagree.

UK urged to raise plight of religious minorities on Modi visit

CSW (09.11.2015) - Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) is calling on Prime Minister David Cameron to raise the plight of India's religious minorities and shrinking space for civil society in bilateral discussions with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his first official visit to the United Kingdom.

Mr Modi's official visit from 12-14 November is the first by an Indian prime minister in nearly a decade.

Since Prime Minister Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power in May 2014, there has been a marked rise in hostility towards religious minorities across India. Hindu nationalism is also on the rise; in the three months after BJP's electoral victory, nearly 2,000 branches (shakhas) of the Hindu nationalist organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological wing of the BJP, were established.

CSW has learned that there have been an estimated 43 deaths in over 600 cases of violence against religious minorities between May 2014 and May 2015, with the majority of attacks perpetrated against Muslims and approximately 194 Christians targeted. An atmosphere of religious intolerance and impunity is further stoked by recent mob hysteria over beef consumption. On 28 September, Mohammad Akhlaq Saifi was lynched

by a mob in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh for allegedly consuming beef meat. Pervasive discrimination and systematic attacks against the Dalit community, who are often Christians, also continues to increase. In March, CSW expressed concern about a spate of attacks on churches and Christian communities.

Impunity often follows attacks against religious minorities. Justice is still outstanding for the victims of communal violence in Muzaffarnagar, Uttar Pradesh State in 2013, which led to 39 deaths and 25,000 displaced, most of them Muslims. Similarly, no one has been held to account for communal violence in Kandhamal, Odisha State in 2008, which targeted Christians and claimed an estimated 100 lives, leading to the displacement of around 56,000 people and the destruction of 295 churches and places of worship.

Advocacy groups and human rights defenders have increasingly come under attack, leading to concerns about the shrinking space for civil society since Modi came to power. Writers and critics of right-wing fundamentalism have been murdered or attacked, such as Govind Pansare, who was killed in February 2015. He had received death threats after a speech in which he alleged that attempts were being made to glorify Mahatma Gandhi's assassin Nathuram Godse since the BJP came to power. A number of Indian writers, artists and scientists have returned their national Sahitya Akademi awards in protest against the government's failure to apprehend the perpetrators of these crimes.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "India's success as the world's largest democracy cannot be measured in purely economic terms without reference to its rights record, and the UK's relationship with India should not focus on trade to the detriment of the enduring values which we hold dear. As the UK reaffirms the values of the Magna Carta this year, CSW urges Prime Minister David Cameron to raise the erosion of fundamental liberties in India with Prime Minister Modi, and to encourage him to ensure that the rights of all of India's citizens are upheld, including the right to freedom of religion or belief. The UK must be vocal in demonstrating that trade does not trump human rights and democratic ideals."

India: village church attacked, Christians hospitalized

World Watch Monitor (06.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1MGEsqL> - Several Christians were hospitalised and others forced to reconvert to Hinduism, after a village church in India's central Chhattisgarh state was attacked by Hindu hardliners.

The Christians from the Independent Pentecostal Church in Kohkameta were attacked during their Sunday morning service on 25 October, two days after villagers had reportedly gathered together to conspire to end all Christian activities in the village.

The Christians were dragged from the church and beaten with sticks. Several were rendered unconscious and others forced to sign pieces of paper declaring they would no longer practise Christianity.

One of the Christians, who wished to remain anonymous out of concern for his safety, told World Watch Monitor what happened.

"There were 35 people in the church, including children. While the prayer service was going on, some young boys and villagers came with sticks and began to beat the believers. They dragged them out and beat them mercilessly," he said.

He said the pastor, Mehtu Karma, 31, was hit on the head and fell unconscious, with blood streaming from his ear. Then the villagers brought in documents for the Christians to sign, declaring they would return to Hinduism.

"They forced believers to sign it. When a believer refused, villagers began to beat them again," he said. "Four families returned to Hinduism."

He said the Christians were warned not to report the incident to police, saying that they would burn down their houses, expel them from the village or even kill them. However, the Christians did report the incident to the local police and to the media.

The witness said villagers then approached the Christians in hospital, saying: "If you don't take back your report from the police station, we will kill you".

Meanwhile, he said the Hindu villagers made their own complaint at the police station, saying: "These believers beat us and threw away our gods and goddesses from our home".

Five Christians were taken to the local Hindu temple, where they were reinitiated into Hinduism. Meanwhile, some of the hospitalised Christians were visited and forced to sign declarations, even though many of them couldn't read them because they are illiterate.

The declaration, signed and dated, states that the individual belongs to the Hindu caste and that they have now returned to Hinduism and will no longer engage in any Christian activity. The declaration takes the form of a court affidavit, which means that the person could face arrest if they are found breaking their promise.

The number of violent attacks on Christians and churches in India has increased recently, as World Watch Monitor reported in September.

India is #21 on Open Doors International's World Watch List, which ranks the 50 countries in which life is most difficult for Christians.

Hindu extremists against the growth of the Christian and Muslim population

Agenzia Fides (4.11.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1l7wPdp> - It is necessary to ascertain the "demographic imbalance" by controlling the supposed growth of the Christians and Muslims population in India: with this purpose, the Hindu extremist group "Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh" (RSS, "National Volunteer Corps"), a widespread network, promoter of the exclusive ideology of Hindutva and numerous acts of violence against religious minorities, has mobilized its members accusing non-Hindu minorities of "infiltration in Indian territory" and of "political conversion".

Citing data from the last census, the movement states: "The proportion of the population of Hindu religion which was 88%, fell to 83.8%, while the Muslim population, which was 9.8% increased up to 14.23% in the period 1951-2011".

According to the group "demographic imbalance, caused by the increase of religious minorities in particular in border areas, may threaten the unity, integrity and identity of the Country". "In the state of Arunachal Pradesh, for example, the Christian population increased by nearly 13 percentage points in a single decade. The unnatural growth of the Christian population in many districts of the country indicates the presence of an organized and targeted religious conversion", says RSS. This is why we ask the government to "reformulate" the national policy of the population and prepare a national register of citizens", divided by religion. Indian Christians fear that such talk could incite religious hatred and increase violence against religious minorities in the country.

NE India - Manipur violence sparks fears of religious conflict

World Watch Monitor (14.09.2015) - <http://bit.ly/1I7wHdH> - India's north-east corner consists of seven states* linked to the rest of the country by a narrow strip of land: tribal peoples there perceive themselves to be very different - in culture, identity, and even looks - from the rest of India.

One state, Manipur, on the Myanmar border and about half the size of Switzerland, is made up of a valley surrounded by hills.

The majority Meitei people group have been Hindu for three centuries and live mainly in the valley. However, nearly all the (hill) tribal peoples (the Naga, Kuki and many others) are now Christian, at least in name, after the activities of Western missionaries who worked among them during the 20th century.

On 31 August the State Legislature passed three bills with the stated aim "to save the culture, tradition, identity and demographic structure of the indigenous people of the state". They are the Protection of Manipur People Bill, the Manipur Land Revenue and Land Reforms (Seventh Amendment) Bill, and the Manipur Shops and Establishments (Second Amendment) Bill. However, tribal militant groups they will instead "legalise the tribal peoples' marginalization".

9 killed, 20 injured

During militants' violent reaction in the town of Churachandpur, at least nine were killed and more than 20 injured, according to District Hospital officials.

Police reported that tribal crowds set fire to the homes of senior government officials, including the Minister for Family Welfare, Hill Area Committee Chairman, MP of Outer Manipur, and seven Legislators - all of tribal origin.

The crowds accused them of betraying their own people by failing to represent them in the Legislative Assembly. None of the government officials were hurt; they were all in the state capital, Imphal, at the time. Later, two unidentified charred bodies were recovered at two separate sites.

The violence was deeply rooted in ethnic animosity between the Meitei and predominantly Christian tribal groups. Observers foresee the unrest escalating into an ethnic and religious clash if the state government fails to handle the matter well.

Eyewitnesses reported that armed men rushed to the arson sites and opened fire on militant protesters. Locals speculated that they were paramilitary insurgents from the Meitei (disguised as Manipur police commandos), because the bullets recovered were not the same as those issued by central government to state police.

This further increased the suspicions of militant tribals that the majority Meitei population is working with the state government to ostracise the tribal peoples.

Local government imposed a curfew from 31 August in an attempt to curtail further violence. A 12-hour bandh (road block) was called by activist tribal student organisations on 1 September, and student groups held a mass rally in the Indian capital, New Delhi, on 2 September. Meanwhile, Kuki tribal associations in the United States said they planned to organise a protest against the Bills in front of The White House in Washington D.C.

'Things are getting worse'

An NGO worker, in Manipur for 10 years, said: "Things are getting worse. If this tension continues it will be trouble in the entire state, extending all the way to the Myanmar border. This may escalate into a large scale conflict between the majority Hindus and the minority tribal Christians."

A Christian tribal pastor, who asked not to be named, added: "This might cause persecution and bloodshed for us minority Christians and tribal people."

Manipur has been constantly disrupted in recent decades by separatist insurgencies, all with different and often competing agendas.

But with the resurgence of Hindu revivalism in mainland India, experts say that ethnic and tribal tensions in the north-east may take on new significance.

Hindu population drops below 80 pct as Muslim ratio rises

Reuters (26.08.2015) - [http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/08/26/india-census-religion-idINKCN0QVOG920150826?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=ff2eef00c1-Religion Weekly Aug 27 2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-ff2eef00c1-399963089](http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/08/26/india-census-religion-idINKCN0QVOG920150826?utm_source=Pew+Research+Center&utm_campaign=ff2eef00c1-Religion+Weekly+Aug+27+2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_3e953b9b70-ff2eef00c1-399963089) - India's Hindus have dropped below 80 percent of the population for the first time since independence and media had speculated the previous government deliberately delayed the release of the data because it showed a rise in the Muslim population.

Members of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling Hindu nationalist party, which swept to power last year, have expressed growing concern about the rising numbers of Muslims.

The census data shows that Hindus declined to 79.8 percent of the country's 1.2 billion people in 2011, from 80.5 percent a decade earlier.

The share of Muslims rose to 14.2 percent from 13.4 percent in 2001 - the only major religious group to record a rise. Christians stayed at 2.3 percent and Sikhs fell to 1.7 percent from 1.9 percent.

Sakshi Maharaj, a Hindu priest-turned-politician, caused an uproar earlier this year when he said Hindu women should give birth to four children to ensure that their religion survives.

In the first census, conducted after Britain carved India and Pakistan out of colonial India in 1947, Hindus accounted for 84.1 percent of the Indian population.

Although population growth is slowing in all religious groups, India is still set to overtake China to become the world's most populous country by 2022, according to a United Nations forecast.

India's population grew by almost a fifth during the period between the last two censuses, straining supplies of land, food and water and bloating its underemployed, poorly skilled workforce.

Christians forced to convert to Hinduism or be denied benefits lifting them out of poverty as 'Untouchables'

The Christian Post (21.07.2015) - <http://wwrn.org/articles/44748/> - A Hindu nationalist organization has converted 39 people from Dalit Christian families to Hinduism in a controversial ceremony aimed at making them eligible for a government benefits program.

"We are moving ahead with our initiative and more families from other religions will be reconverted to Hinduism soon. We are being approached by many people who want to come back to their original faith," said Viswaha Hindu Parishad Alappuzha District Chief Prathap G Padickal, according to the Times of India.

The "ghar wapsi" programme in Kerala's Alappuzha district previously oversaw another 30 Dalit Christians convert to Hinduism in December 2014.

The Dalits, known as the "untouchables," make up India's lowest caste, and are eligible for certain government benefits if they identify as Hindus.

International Christian Concern, which reports on persecution taking place in India, noted that Christians from such low caste backgrounds are often soft targets for Hindu nationalists, who are seeking to take advantage of the stipulation in the government benefits program and lure people of other faiths into Hinduism.

"In most cases, people from low caste backgrounds are afforded government stipends and advantages, but these stipends and advantages are denied to low caste people who are registered as Christians or Muslims in India," ICC noted. "In many cases the allurements of these government stipends and advantages are enough to convince people to convert to Hinduism."

ICC previously said that as many as 25 million Dalits who have converted to Christianity are being forced to choose between their Christian faith and eligibility for these benefits. The government program stretches back to the Scheduled Caste Order of 1950, which determines who can take advantage of these government benefits, and who cannot.

"It also has left millions of Dalits to have to decide between choosing to follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior and receiving government benefits that have the ability to take their families out of poverty. All added up, this discrimination has affected the official appearance of India's religious landscape," the persecution watchdog group said.

The stipulations in the program have also been condemned by Christian rights activists, such as Franklin Caesar, who said:

"This system is against the fundamental rights provided to all India's citizens in the Constitution. The Presidential Order of 1950 has destroyed fundamental and constitutional rights of Dalits from Christian and Muslim backgrounds; the benefits must be delink from religion."

With the rise of Christian and Muslim numbers in India, Hindu extremists have accused other faiths of converting Hindus, and have lashed out in attacks on churches across the country.

Back in June, over 200 Hindu radicals stormed a Protestant church in the town of Attingal, Kerala, where they beat the pastor and several worshippers, before breaking the altar of the church. The attack was only stopped after police arrived at the scene.

Dalit Christians in India file complaint with UN against the Vatican

UCA (30.06.2015) - Christian Dalits in India filed a complaint on Tuesday with the United Nations accusing the Holy See of not doing enough to curb discrimination faced by "untouchables" within the Catholic Church.

A delegation of 22 people from the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) and Viduthalai Tamil Puligal Katchi (a collective of human rights activists) submitted the complaint at the UN Information Centre for India and Bhutan in Delhi.

"We have submitted seven copies of the complaint to Rajeev Chandran, assistant director of the UN Centre in New Delhi addressed to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and different human rights organizations," Mary John, president of the DCLM, told ucanews.com.

The complaint accuses the Vatican and the Indian Catholic Church leadership of caste-based discrimination "by way of allowing it directly and indirectly in their spiritual, educational and administrative places".

The delegation asked the UN and other organizations to urge the Holy See to eradicate the caste discriminatory practices and to withdraw the Permanent Observer position of the Holy See in the UN if the Vatican does not take the necessary steps.

Dalits, or untouchables, are the lowest caste within Hindu society. Huge numbers of Dalits have converted to Christianity and Islam over the decades, though in reality the religions offer limited protection from societal prejudice.

"The discrimination against Dalit Christians in the Catholic Church is a human rights issue and it would be right if we approach the UN to find a solution to it," John said.

Kudanthai Arasan, president of the Viduthalai Tamil Puligal Katchi, said Dalit Christians routinely face discrimination in their daily life.

"There are separate cemeteries for Dalit Christians. Even in the church there are separate seating arrangements for those from the Dalit community and others. The festival choir processions do not enter the streets where Dalit Christians live," he said, adding that in some churches even the dead body of a Dalit Christian is not allowed inside for funeral Mass.

While Dalit Christians form 70 percent of the total Catholic population in India, said John, their representation in the Church leadership is only 4-5 percent.

He added that Dalits are not recruited for the priesthood and are rarely permitted to be appointed as bishops.

Out of about 200 active bishops in India, only nine are from the Dalit community.

"We have raised our voice time and again to end this practice in the Indian Church, but our pleas have been falling on deaf ears," he added.

The Dalit Christians also blamed the top bishops' body in India — the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) — for not pursuing the issue with the Holy See.

"They do not take our case seriously to the Vatican. The CBCI has come out with declarations terming caste-ism as [a] sin but they themselves are practicing it," John said.

However, Fr Joseph Chinnayyan, CBCI deputy secretary general, told ucanews.com that the organization has never received any complaint of discrimination against Dalits in the Catholic Church in the past.

He said that as far as the Dalit Christians' complaint about the issue to the UN is concerned, "we are not aware of any such complaint and will only respond once we receive any communication about it".

Two Christian churches vandalized by suspected Hindu fundamentalists

UCA (23.03.2015) <http://www.ucanews.com/news/check-two-christian-churches-vandalized-by-suspected-hindu-fundamentalists/73238> - Suspected Hindu fundamentalists were accused of vandalizing two more churches in India over the weekend, in the latest violence against Christians in the Hindu-majority country.

Officials from Kalyan diocese in western India said three masked men on motorcycles approached the St George Catholic Church in New Panvel early on Saturday and threw stones, smashing a glass case protecting the statue of Saint George.

In the other incident on Friday, assailants entered the Cathedral complex of the Jabalpur diocese in central India's Madhya Pradesh state.

CCTV footage showed a group of men smashing plant pots, breaking down doors and shattering windows on the grounds of the cathedral.

The right-wing Hindu Dharma Sena group had accused the church of converting around 200 people from local tribal groups to Christianity, although it denies causing any damage to church property.

On Monday, state police said they had arrested six people in the Jabalpur attack.

"We arrested six men last night in connection with the vandalism. We are trying to identify more people... there may be more arrests," HC Mishra, a senior state police official, told AFP by telephone.

However, police then later released the group on bail. Mishra told ucanews.com the arrested were given bail because they were charged with "minor offences under the Indian Penal Code".

Bishop Gerald Almeida of Jabalpur called the releases "very unfortunate".

"Such kind of tokenism from police would not help bring in confidence among beleaguered Christians," he said in an interview.

Almeida said on the same night as the Jabalpur attack, assailants entered a school building a kilometer away and beat up Catholics they had found inside. The victims had travelled to the church for an annual Bible convention, he said.

Marko Baba, a Catholic leader in Jabalpur, said he witnessed some of the attack after friends called him to tell him about the disturbance. He told ucanews.com that the assailants accused the victims of participating in conversions.

Religious conversions are highly controversial in India, a secular country where religious freedom is considered a fundamental right. Critics say Hindu hardline groups have become emboldened since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won power in India last year.

The latest attacks on churches show that "the situation is turning [from] bad to worse," said Cardinal Baselios Cleemis, who heads the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.

"Some people are bent on dividing the country on religious lines and making it a theocracy," he told ucanews.com in an interview Monday. "But the majority who believe in the secular credentials of this nation will not allow it to happen."

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month pledged to crack down on religious violence and ensure freedom of worship for all faiths. He had been criticized for not speaking out earlier.

HRWF Footnote

See more info about other church attacks in India in 2015

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/Church-vandalized-in-Delhi-fourth-in-6-weeks/articleshow/45892142.cms>

<http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-f352-India-police-arrest-Christians-at-New-Delhi-protest-against-church-attacks#.VRCRgLfMs>

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Church-in-Jabalpur-vandalized-allegedly-by-activists-of-Hindu-outfits/articleshow/46653508.cms>

<http://www.dw.de/half-built-church-vandalized-in-northern-india/a-18317876>

[http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/03/23/two more churches vandalized in india / 1131572](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/03/23/two_more_churches_vandalized_in_india_/1131572)

https://www.google.be/search?q=India+churches+vandalized&rlz=1T4MXGB_frBE563BE563&biw=1301&bih=610&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=LZUQVai6ErPB7Ab7n0GgDQ&ved=0CC8QsAQ (Pictures of vandalized churches)

Indian police beat Christian evangelists

WWM (04.03.2015) - Twenty Christian men on an evangelical mission in north-western India last week were illegally detained and tortured by police, according to a human rights group which intervened to force their release.

The People's Union for Civil Liberties worked with local Christians to persuade senior officials to sanction the release of the men, but several were left with severe bruising after the Feb. 25 incident in Jaipur, the capital of India's Rajasthan state.

"We spoke to the Superintendent of Police about the illegal detention and custodial torture," read a Union memorandum, issued later.

Pastor Stephen Raj, one of the leaders of the team from the Hebron Bhakta Singh Fellowship Church in the southern city of Hyderabad, told World Watch Monitor he was "thankful to all of them for rescuing us, especially Kavita [Srivastava]," the regional head of the People's Union for Civil Liberties.

The team had only that morning arrived in the tourist city of Jaipur – known as the 'Pink City' for its terracotta-coloured buildings.

"We went to Rajasthan with a plan to go around preaching and sightseeing for four days, but it lasted only a few hours," Raj said.

The men had arrived at Jaipur's Mansarovar Centre in the afternoon, equipped with a megaphone, intending to preach and to distribute evangelical literature.

"As soon as we started, a man came and asked, 'What is this?' He took our leaflet and went. He must have called the police," Raj said.

When a group of Hindu protesters amassed, the police – in a state governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party – dispersed them.

But later, as the Christians were walking back to their hostel, the hardliners followed.

"When we reached the place we were staying, they started abusing us and called the police again," Raj said. "The police came and took us to the police station in two jeeps. They made us stretch out our palms and beat us severely with wooden lathis," sticks often carried by Indian police. "Those who pulled their hands back after the first beating came in for more beatings. Many of us have bruises and blood clots on our palms six days later."

"If they [the human rights activists] had not reached us promptly, we might have had to face more torture," Raj said.

Srivastava said she was "happy that we could reach there in time and rescue them from the police."

After Srivastava's intervention, senior officials ordered the police to take the Christians back to their hostel late that night, said Walter Masih, the evangelical pastor who had coordinated the visit of the preaching team.

However, according to the statement of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, "The police who had gone to drop [off] the 20 [Christians] had pressured the owner of the hostel...to not let them spend the night there. The [Christians] were thrown out with food and water on the road and told to make their way to the railway station and not return to the city. They were told that cases of [forced] conversions would be filed if they would not leave the city."

Seven of India's 29 states have laws forbidding forced religious conversions. Ostensibly meant to protect each person's freedom of belief, the laws are often used against religious minorities.

Masih, who was attacked by Hindu hardliners while holding a Sunday service in Jaipur in 2007, said: "Police ordered them to carry their luggage and told them they would be dropped at the railway station. But the police left them on the [side of the] road around midnight."

The men were left to find their own way to the bus station, where they boarded a bus to New Delhi, 270 kilometres north, before taking a train to Hyderabad the next day.

"The Hindu fundamentalists were there shouting slogans even against us Hindus while we were in the police station. That shows the danger the country is facing today," said Srivastava. "This is a clear case of the police being used to harass minorities, especially Christians."

Srivastava said the incident occurred less than 48 hours after Mohan Bhagwat, national chief of the right-wing Hindu group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, attacked the work of Mother Theresa on his own visit to Rajasthan on Feb. 23.

Bhagwat, addressing a women's empowerment program in a village in the Bharatpur district, said: "It's good to work for a cause with selfless intentions, but Mother Theresa's work had an ulterior motive, which was to convert the person who was being served to Christianity."

"In the name of service, religious conversions were made. This was followed by other institutes, too," Bhagwat told the women's conference.

Bhagwat is campaigning for India to become a Hindu 'Rashtra,' or nation. The Bharatiya Janata Party, political front of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has held a majority in the Indian Parliament since May 2014.

Bhagwat's comments about Mother Theresa sparked a national furore that even disrupted the Indian Parliament; the Upper House was briefly adjourned as it debated the issue on Feb. 26.

"The whole nation was shocked by Bhagwat's statement," said Srivastava. "The RSS has its clear agenda – to create animosity against the Christians and others. The result is before us.... As long as such hate speeches are not stopped, the attacks against Christians and others will only increase."

Evangelical Fellowship of India: persecution watch annual report 2014

<http://www.worldea.org/images/wimg/files/EFI.Persecution.Watch.Annual.Report.2014.pdf>

World Evangelical Alliance (26.02.2015) –

<http://www.worldea.org/news/4526/evangelical-fellowship-of-india-persecution-watch-annual-report-2014> -

The Christian community in India is concerned at the intensity of the targeted and communal violence directed against it almost on a pan India basis. Violence against Christians picked up in independent India in the early 1990s reaching its peak in 2008 - 2009 with more than 1000 incidents of violence and hate crimes reported against the Christian community. This continues today as vicious hate campaign, physical violence, police complicity, and State impunity contribute to the persecution of the Christian community in many states of India.

Human Rights and Civil Society groups have documented the death of at least two persons in 2014, killed for their Christian faith. The Persecution data lists partially 147 cases. The two cases of death in communal anti Christian violence were reported from Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

An analysis of the data shows Chhattisgarh topping the list with 28 incidents of crime, followed closely by neighbouring Madhya Pradesh with 26, Uttar Pradesh with 18 and Telengana, a newly carved out of Andhra Pradesh, with 15 incidents. Much of the violence has taken place after the new government of the National Democratic alliance headed by the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, came into power on 26 May, 2014.

The violence peaked between August and October with 56 cases, before zooming up to 25 cases during the Christmas season. The violence has continued well into the New Year 2015, with more Catholic churches in the capital city of Delhi targeted, as incidents continue in other states.

Much of the violence, 54 percent, is of threats, intimidation, coercion, often with the police looking on. Physical violence constituted a quarter of all cases, 24 per cent, and violence against Christian women, a trend that is increasingly being seen since the carnage in Kandhamal, Odisha, in 2007 and 2008, was 11 per cent. Breaking of statues and the Cross, and other acts of desecration were recorded in about 8 per cent of the cases, but many more were also consequent to other forms of violence against institutions. A disturbing trend was violence against Christians in West Bengal, where though one case was formally reported; there have been increasing incidents of hate speech and intimidation..

Police inaction and its failure to arrest the guilty in most cases, its propensity to try to minimise the crime, and in rural areas especially, its open partisanship has almost become the norm. Police ineptitude in forensic investigations has been seen even in New Delhi where four of the five cases in the months of December 2014 and January 2015 have seen no progress in the investigations. In the one case where there were arrests, the Church and the community have cast doubts on the police version of the motives of the suspects whose images were recorded in the Close Circuit TV cameras installed in the church.

The President of India, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, noted the rise of communalism and the targeting of religious minorities in his address to the Nation on 25th January 2015, the eve of Republic Day. President Mukherjee said "In an international environment where so many countries are sinking into the morass of theocratic violence ...We have always reposed our trust in faith -equality where every faith is equal before the law and every culture blends into another to create a positive dynamic. The violence of the tongue cuts and wounds people's hearts. The Indian Constitution is the holy book of democracy. It is a lodestar for the socio - economic transformation of an India whose civilisation has celebrated pluralism, advocated tolerance and promoted goodwill between diverse communities. These values, however, need to be preserved with utmost care and vigilance."

Mr. Mukherjee touched a point that has worried many among even those who voted for Mr. Modi hoping he would bring about a change from the corruption and economic coma in which the country had found itself in the last few years. The Union and State governments have been dismissive of the Christian complaints of targeted violence and persecution, both by political non-State actors and other elements.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

1. Enact a comprehensive hate crimes legislation to safeguard the rights of religious minorities.
2. The Ministry of Home Affairs should provide trainings on human rights and religious freedom standards and practices to the state and central police and judiciary;
3. Although maintenance of public order is a state responsibility, the central government should issue an advisory to the state governments to repeal the anti-conversion laws;

4. The government should ensure an active Commission for Human Rights and Commission for Minorities is operational in every state, and that members of each commission are appointed by transparent and non-partisan procedures;
 5. Prevent and pursue through the judicial process, all violent acts against religious and tribal minorities and Dalits.
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Narendra Modi: India PM warns against religious attacks

BBC News (17.02.2015) - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-31499978> India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has vowed to protect all religious groups after a string of attacks on churches in Delhi.

Addressing a Christian audience in the capital, he called on all religious groups to show restraint and respect.

Since December, five churches have been attacked, but this is the first time Mr Modi has commented on the issue.

Critics say his Hindu nationalist BJP government is not doing enough to stop Hindu zealots targeting minorities.

Mr Modi has also been blamed for not doing enough to stop the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat when he was the state's chief minister.

More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the violence, which were sparked by a fire on a train at Godhra in Gujarat that killed 59 Hindu pilgrims.

Mr Modi has denied any wrongdoing and Indian courts have cleared him of all charges.

"I condemn violence against any religion. We will act strongly against such violence," Mr Modi said at a conference organised by Christian groups in Delhi on Tuesday.

"My government will not allow any group belonging to majority or minority to incite hatred against other communities."

Mr Modi also said that "everyone has the undeniable right to retain or adopt the religion of his or her choice without coercion or undue influence".

Christian groups accuse hard-line Hindu groups, emboldened by Mr Modi's landslide in last year's general election, of carrying out the recent attacks, but police say there is little evidence for this.

They say they have provided security to more than 200 churches in the capital.

Obama challenges India on women's rights and religious tolerance

President speaks out in Delhi on importance of empowering women in India in wake of recent high-profile sexual attacks

The Guardian (27.01.2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/27/obama--india-womens-rights-religious-intolerance-delhi> -

Barack Obama challenged India's record on religious tolerance and women's rights on Tuesday in a parting speech to students in Delhi that contrasted with the at-times saccharin feel of a state visit designed to highlight the closeness of the two countries.

Though careful to acknowledge inequality in the US, the president devoted a substantial part of his speech to a lecture on the importance of empowering women in society and addressed a recent spate of sexual attacks in the emerging south Asian power.

"We know from experience that nations are more successful when their women are successful," said Obama. "These are facts. So if nations really want to succeed in today's global economy, they can't simply ignore the talents of half of their people."

"Every daughter deserves the same chance as our sons," he added. "And every woman should be able to go about her day – to walk the street, or ride the bus – and be safe and be treated with the respect and dignity that she deserves."

A series of [high profile gang rapes and other attacks on women](#) in India have prompted widespread public anger. But despite repeated promises by authorities to improve security for women, campaigners say the problem remains acute.

During his only public appearance of the trip without prime minister Narendra Modi by his side, Obama also promoted the rights of religious minorities in the predominantly Hindu country.

"The peace we seek in the world begins in human hearts; it finds its glorious expression when we look beyond any differences in religion or tribe and rejoice in the beauty of every soul," said the president, who namechecked prominent Indian Muslims, Sikhs and sportswomen. "It's when all Indians, whatever your faith, go to the movies and applaud actors like Shah Rukh Khan. When you celebrate athletes like Milkha Singh, or Mary Kom," he said.

Before becoming prime minister, Modi was previously denied a US visa following accusations he had stood by during, or even encouraged, sectarian violence in the western state of Gujarat in 2002, when he was chief minister. More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed by rioters. The 64 year old former rightwing organiser has described himself as a Hindu nationalist and been criticised for not being more vocal about religious pluralism since taking power.

"No society is immune from the darkest impulses of men," said Obama. "India will succeed so long as it is not splintered along the lines of religious faith."

A series of attempts by rightwing Hindu groups to hold mass conversion ceremonies has sparked controversy in recent months. Last week the hardline Vishnu Hindu Parishad group claimed to have ["re-converted" more than 20 Christians](#) in the southern state of Kerala. The organisations come from the same broad political family as Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

However, the US president also acknowledged signs of progress in Indian society, pointing to the symbolic choice of a woman military officer to lead the honour guard on his arrival and to Modi's humble background as a tea-seller as sign of how India has become more socially mobile.

Modi, a political outsider, comes from low down on the tenacious social hierarchy known as caste which still defines social status and determines opportunities for hundreds of millions of Indians.

Obama's own background as the first black US president helped soften his blunt message to India as he also highlighted the two country's shared history of colonialism and oppression. He referenced his grandfather's work as a cook in Kenya when it was under British control, and when Martin Luther King came to India to draw inspiration from Gandhi, he was introduced to some schoolchildren as a "fellow untouchable".

"Even as we live in a world of wrenching inequities, we're also proud to live in countries where even the grandson of cook can become president, even a Dalit can help write a constitution, and even a tea-seller can become prime minister," Obama said.

"Many countries, including America, grapple with complex questions of identity and inequality," he added in his speech, delivered before 2,000 students and human rights activists at Siri Fort auditorium in Delhi.

"Right now, in crowded neighbourhoods not far from here, a man is driving an auto-rickshaw, or washing somebody else's clothes, or doing the hard work no one else will do. A woman is cleaning somebody else's house. A young man is on a bicycle delivering lunch. A little girl is hauling a heavy bucket of water. Their dreams, their hopes, are just as big and beautiful and worthy as ours."

The speech prompted lively discussion on Indian television afterwards about whether it would be seen as a snub to Modi, but contrasted with more effusive coverage of earlier speeches and more trivial moments such as [pictures of him chewing gum](#) during Republic Day parade.

Siddarth Varadarajan, a Delhi-based analyst, said that the "very gentle hint" about religious inclusiveness from Obama sent an "important message".

"He went about as far as any diplomatic visitor can go, and quoted the constitution, so how can anyone object to that. But it highlights the silence of the prime minister on this issue," Varadarajan said.

Obama concluded by quoting Gandhi on India's traditions of tolerance: "He said, 'for me, the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree'. Branches of the same majestic tree."

Obama concluded by quoting Gandhi on India's traditions of tolerance: "He said, 'for me, the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree'. Branches of the same majestic tree."

Ahead of Obama's visit, India's Christians start hotline on Hindu harassment

WWM (26.01.2015) - Indian Christians from across denominations have formed a legal-aid agency, complete with a telephone hotline number, to respond to increasing attacks that have followed the rise of Hindu nationalists to national power.

The United Christian Forum for Human Rights was formed Jan. 19 "to coordinate both legal and advocacy assistance to the community, which has been traumatized in recent months by communal violence in several states," said John Dayal, a prominent Christian activist and spokesperson for the new group, in a statement to World Watch Monitor.

Harassment of India's Christians has increased since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, swept parliamentary elections in May 2014.

The new initiatives have been assembled ahead of U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to India. Asked whether the flurry of anti-Christian violence would figure on Obama's agenda, the new Forum Secretary Rev Vijayesh Lal said: "We have to speak up for ourselves."

Four days before the US President arrived, the Catholic Church urged the government "to uphold the secular character of India." This plea emerged from a meeting of India's top Catholic Church leadership.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference said that recent attacks on Christians, the clamour to turn India into a Hindu nation and attacks on churches and Christians in several parts of the country have "shaken the faith in the secular fabric of the nation."

"The UCF has commissioned a 24-hour National Helpline, 1-800-208-4545, so that lawyers and experts can assist victims of violence, intimidation, coercion and illegal confinement by any criminal or political group," the organizers said in the statement.

"We have had more than 4,000 calls already. Most of them are out of eagerness to verify if it is working and also to express solidarity," said Tehmina Arora, a lawyer with the Alliance for Defending Freedom India.

But already, three serious cases of atrocities have been reported, Arora said. These include a dozen Christian families being ostracized near Kanyakumari, in the peninsular southern tip of India; Christians being prevented from building a church in western Gujarat state; and intimidation of Christians in eastern Bihar state.

"We are verifying these complaints and Christian lawyers in the area will be asked to help them," Arora said.

United Christian Forum coordinator A C Michael said the new forum will be "more of an action group." Christian networks such as the Evangelical Fellowship of India, the Christian Lawyers' Association and the Alliance for Defending Freedom India will be involved in providing timely legal support for needy Christians.

"Church leadership will not be directly involved in it, though we have the blessings of the churches," Michael said. "The Helpline and the Forum will be a watch group to monitor the developments affecting the community."

So far in 2015, at least one violent incident against Christians has been reported each week, according to speakoutagainsthate.org, a website that monitors violence and other attacks on Christian religious freedom.

In December, the National Human Rights Commission of India issued notices to five states – the north-central states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu – citing media reports of acts of violence and atrocities against Christians, according to The Times of India.

"These frequent attacks on the religious institutions of the minority community, if true, violate the fundamental right to freedom of religion and cause immense harm to the social fabric," a Commission statement said.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the Delhi-based Evangelical Fellowship of India recorded 31 incidents targeting Christians in December alone. The cases included physical violence, false accusations, disruption of church services or Christmas functions, hate campaigns and pressure to convert to Hinduism.

The attacks on minorities, including Christians, also led to a debate in the parliament on "rising communal incidents in the country," according to NDTV, a private news channel.

"2014 has been a ... traumatic year... A campaign based on hate ends the year in decisions based on hate," Dayal said at the launch of the new forum, alluding to the election campaign of the BJP and its victory.

In 2014, the EFI monitored at least 144 such cases, but said the actual number is likely to be much higher.

While Christians, churches and their institutions are being attacked in Delhi and various state capitals, cases in smaller cities and villages often go unreported, and victims have little help.

"The United Christian Forum has come together so that we are able to ensure that the voice of the persons in the villages ... reaches New Delhi," forum Chairman Michael William announced at the function.

"The United Christian Forum is about a collective response from our community," said Secretary Rev Vijayesh Lal. "What UCF stands for ... is that we care, that we are here, we are together and we are one body."

The BJP is widely seen as the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an umbrella Hindu nationalist group which champions the concept of Hindutva, an ideology that envisions a Hindu India where minorities are allowed to exist, but in subordination to the majority.

Dayal said Christians live under pressure in India no matter who is at the helm of the government.

"It does not matter who the government is, which the government is," he said. "The non-state actors remain the same, the progress of the judicial criminal system remains the same."

The new Christian Forum and hotline have been assembled just as India hosts U.S. President Barack Obama. Asked whether the flurry of anti-Christian violence would figure into Obama's agenda, Lal said: "We have to speak up for ourselves."

Four days before the president arrived, the Catholic Church issued a statement urging the government "to uphold the secular character of India." This plea emerged from a meeting of India's top Catholic church leadership including the four Cardinals in the Indian Church.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference said that recent attacks on Christians, the clamour to turn India into a Hindu nation and attacks on churches and Christians in several parts of the country have "shaken the faith in the secular fabric of the nation."

Pramod Singh, President of the Christian Legal Association of India and part of the new United Christian Forum, said the idea of India, as "conceived by our founding fathers," is under threat.

He read the preamble to the Constitution before the audience: "We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic, and to secure to all its citizens: justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation."

John Dayal said Christians should meet the challenge in prayer "on bended knees."

"But bended before God," he stressed. "Not bended before man and not bended before non-state actors or (the) state itself. India is our motherland, and we claim our rights as children of God and citizens of India with the Bible in one hand and the Constitution of India in the other."

Indian Bishops tell government NO to "saffronisation", YES to secularism

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) calls on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to "urgently intervene" to stop threats against religious freedom across the nation. The impunity enjoyed by radical Hindu groups represents a danger for minorities.

AsiaNews/CBCI (22.01.2015) - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Indian-Bishops-tell-government-no-to-saffronisation,-yes-to-secularism-33262.html> - Following repeated attempts to "**reconvert Christians and Muslims to Hinduism**," (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Indian-bishop:-conversions-are-a-blow-to-democracy-and-human-dignity-32958.html>) attacks against "churches, clergy and laity," and the "**saffronisation of education and culture**," (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Catholic-activist-against-handing-education-over-to-Hindu-fundamentalists-32976.html>) the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has made a direct appeal to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and to the central government to take a clear position against extremists and radical groups who have gained in power in the wake of the victory by the ultra nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and in so doing they have created a climate of tension and discrimination among minorities.

Recently, a major fundamentalist group called for a **[national law to stop conversions](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/A-national-anti-conversion-law-to-save-India%27s-Hindus-33247.html)** (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/A-national-anti-conversion-law-to-save-India%27s-Hindus-33247.html>) to religions other than Hinduism. In view of this, "putting an end to such dangerous tendencies is inevitable for the growth and progress of our great nation," the bishops said.

"The Constitution of India guarantees that all the citizens of our country can profess, practice and propagate a religion of their choice. India is a land where different religious faiths have long since flourished, and our Founding Fathers made special efforts to ensure that the rights of all were safeguarded, irrespective of our religious beliefs, gender or caste. Christianity has its roots in Indian soil for more than 2000 years.

"The Christians of India believe in God and believe in the goodness of people and have been selflessly serving the people of this country in the fields of education, health care, etc. without any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or religion.

"The unfortunate incidents that happened in the past few months in various parts of our country have hurt the sentiments of the Christian community and have shaken the faith in the secular fabric of the nation. The shocking incidents that have taken place against Churches, clergy and laity in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi have caused great concern for the Christian community. The recent controversies in the name of religious reconversions portray a negative image of India. Communal polarization and the bid to homogenize India are posing threat to all minorities - women, Dalits, and all linguistic, cultural and religious minorities.

"The *Ghar Wapsi* (homecoming) programmes, the saffronisation of education and culture, and the demands for a Hindu Rashtra (nation) are again posing challenges to the secular ethos of our beloved country. Conversions of a religious nature are an exercise of one's free will and one's fundamental constitutional rights, which include freedom of conscience and of religion. *Ghar Wapsi* is a political process, carried out by the powerful exponents of religious nationalism - much against the principle of secularism. It does not even have the legitimacy of freedom of political expression.

"The Christians of this country need assurance from the Government that we are protected and secure and safe in our motherland. We express our strong concern on the aforementioned issues. Putting an end to such dangerous tendencies is inevitable for the growth and progress of our great nation. This great secular nation has to remain as a place where people of all religions and of different cultural backgrounds can live freely, practicing their faith without fear or threat and in harmony. While we recommit ourselves to the progress and development of our nation, we strongly urge Prime Minister Narendra Modi to urgently intervene and take appropriate action to stop incidents that are a big threat to the unity of this secular nation.

Foreign money being spent on religious conversions is an open secret: Venkaiah Naidu

Indian Express (08.01.2015) - Describing religious conversions and re-conversions as equally bad, Union Urban Development Minister Venkaiah Naidu on Thursday said that a "lot of foreign money has been spent on conversions" in India in the past.

"Unnecessary controversies are being raised about conversions.... The (Modi) government is not involved in this. We do not support any religion. The government has no religion. It is the people who have religion and we respect people's faith," he said assuaging any possible fears of Non-Resident India's who had gathered in large numbers at the 13th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) at Gandhinagar here.

The minister while presiding over a plenary session on "Opportunities in India" at the PBD, reassured the elite gathering saying that "development and good governance" were the only "agenda" of both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA government. The minister's comments were greeted by a huge applause at the event where other top ministers of the Modi-government including Uma Bharti, Birender Singh, Mahesh Sharma and Rajiv Pratap Rudy, were also present.

Naidu went to add that Hindutava was not connected to any religion. "We will not support anti-conversion, re-conversion or conversion. It is left to the people. The government will go for a (anti-conversion) law, provided there is a consensus and request from all political parties."

However, also made remarks saying, "If reconversion is bad, conversion is also bad..." Though he repeatedly reassured the gathering that his government was not involved in conversions, Naidu went on say, "India is a free country... It is not that conversions are happening just during the reign of this government. Conversions and re-conversions have been happening in India since the last 200 years. A lot of foreign money is being spent on conversions and it is an open secret..."

"We are neither right or left; we are straight," said Naidu while describing his government's stance on the issue. He said he was forced to clarify on this issue as "some people" and "few English newspapers" were creating controversy on the issue. He said that PM has been connecting directly with the people irrespective of what was being talked about in some news "studios".

Conversion to Islam raises questions about patriotism: VHP

Indian Express (03.01.2015) - The VHP on Friday claimed "ghar wapsi" was essential for the "improvement of the nation" and said that conversion to Islam raised questions about the individual's "nationalism" and "patriotism". The outfit, in a statement issued during a press conference in the Capital on Friday, also linked conversions to Christianity with terrorism in the Northeast.

The VHP also evoked Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda to defend "ghar wapsi". The VHP claimed Swami Vivekananda had said that converting to another religion from Hinduism meant that the "Hindu society has another enemy". The outfit further claimed that Gandhi believed that the "goal of Christian missionaries is to uproot Hindutva completely and to establish a different ideology in its place".

The VHP statement further said, "As a result of conversion (to Islam), questions are raised on their nationality and patriotism." The statement was issued by VHP national secretary Dharma Narayan Sharma and Jugal Kishore, functionary in charge of "ghar wapsi".

With the VHP planning a "ghar wapsi" of over 3,000 Muslims in Ayodhya in February, secretary general Champat Rai claimed the "need of the hour" was to ensure that anyone "who has converted to Christianity or Islam and is willing to join Hindu society, is reintegrated into Hindu society and returns to their mool jaati (original caste)".

Reiterating VHP president Praveen Togadia's view that "ghar wapsi" didn't imply conversion, Rai said conversion to other religions from Hinduism leads to individuals becoming disconnected from their ancestors. "We are not asking people to forsake anything. We want them to reconnect with their ancestors, their culture and traditions," he said.

On day 2, Bathinda 'ghar wapsi' still a damp squib

For the second consecutive day Friday, none of the 200 Christian families turned up for the 'ghar wapsi', organised by the VHP here.

On Thursday, the VHP had organised 'ghar wapsi' for 100 Christian families, who were to be "reconverted" to Sikhism and Hinduism. When they failed to show up, the VHP had claimed that 200 such families would be reconverted Friday.

The VHP has now indefinitely postponed the programme in Bathinda, but "efforts are on to convince families to return to Hinduism/Sikhism by Maghi, and the programme may be held on January 13 or 14".

VHP state secretary Sukhpal Singh Sran cited "worsening relations between SAD and BJP" as the main reason for the families refusing to turn up. "The programme for ghar wapsi of around 200 families is postponed as of now. There was immense pressure on us and the families from Christians and local Sikh organisations," he added.
