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Uttar Pradesh: Christian graves vandalized (video) and false accusations of forced conversions

Crosses taken down; tombstones smashed. State led by Hindu nationalist party. Growing violence against Christians in the region. The Hindu Yuva Vahini organization, founded by the Chief Minister, for the return of the Dalits to Hinduism.

By Nirmala Carvalho

Asia News (27.03.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2oteZ67> - Crosses taken down; tombstones smashed: at least ten Christian tombs were vandalized in the Rajapur Allahabad cemetery (Uttar Pradesh), as shown in a video published below and provided by the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC). Its president, Sajan K George, told *AsiaNews*: "The violence against Christian tombs deeply hurt our religious feelings and show contempt for our ancestors. "This is done with the culture of impunity, and with intent to cause insecurity and fear in the minds of the miniscule Christian community. As can be seen, crosses have been broken, and epitaphs of nearly a dozen graves have been smashed".

Uttar Pradesh is the most populous state in India, where the Hindu nationalist BJP party won an unprecedented victory in recent weeks. But the state is also known for a crescendo of violence against Christians.

On the same days the vandalism took place at the cemetery, the Hindu Yuva Vahini volunteers, an organization of the extreme right founded in 2002 by the current Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, began spreading accusations of forced conversions to Christianity of local Dalit communities.

Sajan K George calls the allegations "completely unfounded."

Toma, the head of the Hindu Yuva Vahini for the area west of Uttar Pradesh said: "The Christian missionaries have lured our young people for decades. We must identify these people and persuade them to return to their religion of origin. "

The GCIC president said: "India is a democratic and secular nation, and we Christians are a tiny 2.3% of the population. The conversion accusations are baseless and false."

A video of the damage done to the cemetery: <https://youtu.be/aypsrJiY9zk>

Report examines legal restrictions religious minorities face

USCIRF (08.02.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2k43zYK> - A new report, [Constitutional and Legal Challenges Faced by Religious Minorities in India](#), examines India's constitution and national and state laws that violate the religious freedom of both minority communities and Hindu Dalits. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) sponsored this report, which Dr. Iqtidar Karamat Cheema wrote. Dr. Cheema is the Director of the Institute for Leadership and Community Development, based in England.

"India is a religiously diverse and democratic society with a constitution that provides legal equality for its citizens irrespective of their religion and prohibits religion-based discrimination," said USCIRF Chair Thomas J. Reese, S.J. "However, the reality is far different. In fact, India's pluralistic tradition faces serious challenges in a number of its states. During the past few years, religious tolerance has deteriorated and religious freedom violations have increased in some areas of India. To reverse this negative trajectory, the Indian and state governments must align their laws with both the country's constitutional commitments and international human rights standards."

The study highlights opportunities for the Indian government to revise laws so that they would align with the country's constitution and international human rights standards. The study also makes recommendations to the U.S. government on ways to promote religious freedom in India.

For more information, please see USCIRF's chapter on India in its [2016 Annual Report](#).

Witnesses may challenge SC anthem order

The latest move by the Jehovah's Witnesses will seek to overturn the apex court's order on November 30, 2016, that all cinema halls in India would play the national anthem before the feature film starts.

By Maneesh Chhibber

Indian Express (09.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iffcl> - Over 30 years ago, a college professor in Kerala, who belonged to the Jehovah's Witnesses sect, knocked at the doors of the highest court in India on behalf of his children, citing religion as the reason to safeguard their right to not sing the national anthem at school.

Next month, when a Supreme Court bench headed by Justice Dipak Misra restarts hearing petitions on its order last year on national anthems in cinema halls, the Jehovah's Witnesses may again be at the forefront in challenging that decision.

On August 11, 1986, the Supreme Court had allowed Emmanuel's plea and held that forcing the children to sing the national anthem at school violated their fundamental right to religion.

The latest move by the Jehovah's Witnesses will seek to overturn the apex court's order on November 30, 2016, that all cinema halls in India would play the national anthem before the feature film starts. This order also made it mandatory for all present in the hall "to stand up to show respect to the national anthem" as part of their "sacred obligation".

This time, it's learnt that representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses, including a US-based general counsel, are in the process of finalising a detailed application to be filed shortly in Supreme Court, which will restart hearings on February 14.

Among other things, the sect plans to seek the court's intervention in ordering that its followers won't have to stand up for the anthem in movie theatres. The sect hopes to convince the court that while it respects the national anthem and the flag, its religious beliefs prevent members from standing up for or singing the anthem.

The organisation has already secured relief on behalf of the sect on various issues in several countries, including saluting the flag and/or singing a country's national anthem.

"Our patriotism can never be in doubt. But even standing for the national anthem is not allowed in our religion. Courts in several other countries have accepted our pleas on this count. The fact that we are looking to contest the court's order doesn't mean that we don't respect our flag or our anthem. We hope to convince the court about that, like we have done in other countries, including the US and Canada," said sources linked to the sect's move.

When contacted, former Union law minister and senior advocate Kapil Sibal confirmed that he has been approached by representatives of the sect in this regard.

"They informed me that their religious views don't allow them to even stand up when the anthem is played. Their stand is that this doesn't mean they will ever do anything to disrespect any country's flag or anthem. These are issues of significant Constitutional importance," Sibal told The Indian Express.

Jehovah's Witnesses is a Christianity-based evangelical sect, which bases its beliefs solely on the text of the Bible. The group does not celebrate Easter or Christmas and believes that traditional Churches have deviated from the text of the Bible.

However, the sect is not considered a part of mainstream Christianity because it also rejects the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

In the 1986 case, the Supreme Court bench had ruled in favour of the Jehovah's Witnesses family. "Our tradition teaches tolerance, our philosophy teaches tolerance, our Constitution practices tolerance, let us not dilute it," the bench had said. It had also noted that there was "no provision of law", which "obliges" anyone to sing the national anthem.

However, the bench of Justice Misra, in its order last year, had said that "a time has come" when "citizens of the country must realise that they live in a nation and are duty bound to show respect to the National Anthem, which is the symbol of Constitutional patriotism and inherent national quality".

On December 9, the bench clarified its order to state that "if a physically challenged person or physically handicapped person goes to the cinema hall to watch a film, he need not stand up, if he is incapable to stand, but must show such conduct which is commensurate with respect for the national anthem".

The order has drawn widespread criticism, with renowned jurist Soli Sorabjee terming it as an example of "judicial overreach".

In 1986, armed with the Supreme Court order, Emmanuel got his and other children from Jehovah's Witnesses re-admitted in the NSS High School at Kidangoor in Kottayam district, 4 km from their village Kadaplamattom near Pala. The school run by the Hindu organisation, Nair Service Society, had 11 students from the sect, at the time.

After sitting in the classes for a day, the Emmanuel children left school. Some of the other children from the sect moved to other schools.

Emmanuel decided not to have formal education for his other four children, either. None of his eight grandchildren, who study in various schools, sings the national anthem.

Supreme Court decides use of religion to gain electoral votes is corrupt practice

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (05.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2iViC5z> - The Supreme Court of India delivered a decision on 2 January 2017 that an appeal by a political candidate to vote or refrain from voting on grounds of caste, race, community or religion amounts to corrupt practices.

In a 4:3 verdict, the seven-judge bench examined the relationship between candidates standing for public office and Section 123(3) of the Representation of People Act, 1951(as amended in 1956), which bars a candidate standing for elections, either directly or through their agents, from appealing to any person to vote or refrain from voting on the grounds of their caste, race, community or religion.

Chief Justice, T.S. Thakur observed that "The State being secular in character will not identify itself with any one of the religions or religious denominations. This necessarily implies that religion will not play any role in the governance of the country which must at all times be secular in nature....electoral processes are doubtless secular activities of the State. Religion can have no place in such activities for religion is a matter personal to the individual with which neither the State nor any other individual has anything to do."

Tariq Adeeb, a Supreme Court lawyer in India said, "This is a welcome decision by the Supreme Court and a big blow to the politicians and their parties who play politics in the name of religion by using their most favoured tool – hate speech and propaganda to polarise votes. The Supreme Court once again has come forward to rescue 'secular India' which is under threat of being hijacked by right wing Hindu extremist groups."

While a landmark decision, the apex court did not reconsider the legal definition of Hindutva. In 1996, a three-judge bench lead by the late Chief Justice J.S Verma ruled that Hindutva was a way of life and a state of mind, not a religion, overturning a decision by the Bombay High Court, which had nullified Shiv Sena (an Indian far-right political party that promotes Hindutva ideology) leader Manohar Joshi's election results. Joshi had campaigned promising to turn the state of Maharashtra into India's first Hindu State and the Bombay High Court had ruled that Joshi had violated his constitutional commitment to secularism by using religion to seek votes.

Dr John Dayal the former National President of the All India Catholic Union, while welcoming the 2017 decision, noted, "The BJP and the Sangh and their allies are the main groups that are guilty of invoking religious arguments and hate speech although it is unlikely they will comply with the 2017 Supreme Court judgment in their election campaigns. This judgment also seems incomplete as it has not reversed or closed the Hindutva issue delivered by the late Chief Justice J.S. Verma, which effectively removed the Hindu rhetoric out of the election commission's scrutiny. Elections were never meant to be fought on grounds of religion."

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said, "CSW welcomes this landmark decision by the Supreme Court. We hope this decision will bring an end to religiously divisive words and actions being used for political advancement, especially during elections, and that the decision will challenge the legitimacy of far right divisive groups using communal

propaganda to gain political support. CSW calls on the government of India to uphold the Court's decision in the upcoming Assembly elections in five states in India."
