

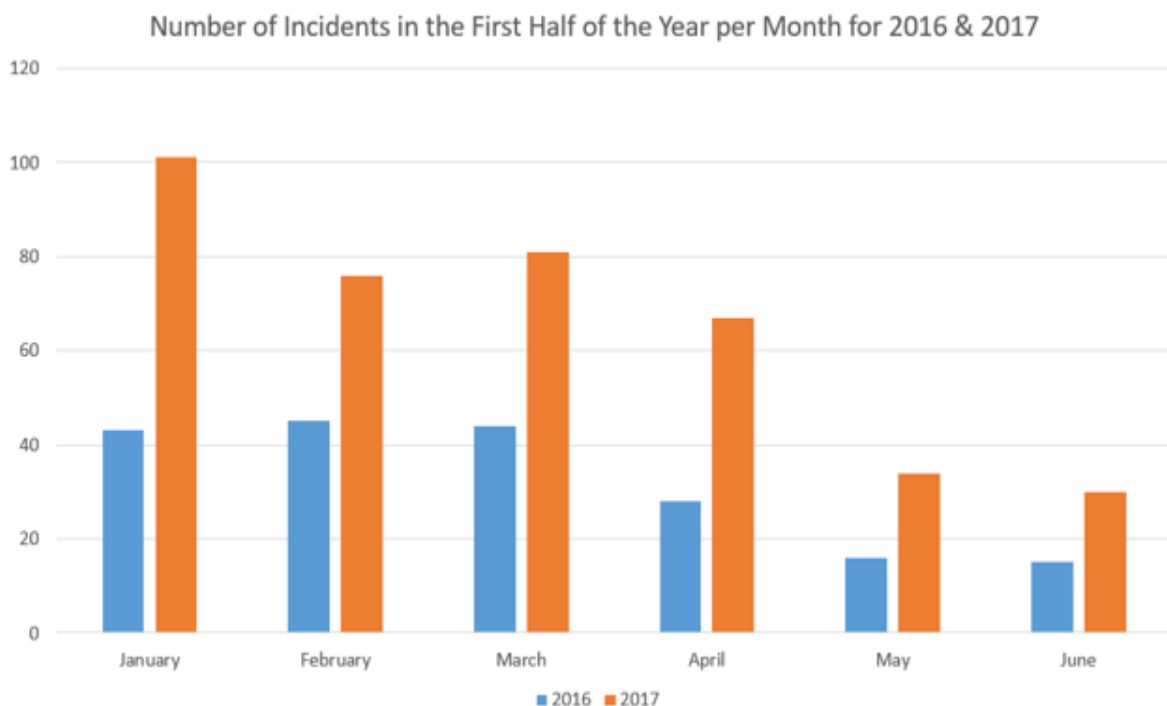
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## **Indian Christians faced almost as many attacks in first half of 2017 as all of 2016**

World Watch Monitor (08.08.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2vPCL40> - In the first six months of 2017, Indian Christians were harassed, threatened or attacked for their faith in 410 reported incidents (248 in the first quarter) – almost as many as the total for the whole of 2016 (441). This is according to figures compiled by partners of Open Doors, the global charity which monitors the treatment of Christians worldwide to produce an annual World Watch List of the 50 most difficult countries for them to live in. Last year, India was at its highest ever on the List – at no. 15; it looks set to rise higher in 2018 if present trends continue.



In January, April, May and June the number of incidents this year were more than double that of 2016.

In February and March the number is nearly double that of 2016.

There were two killings in the first half of 2017.

Eighty-four incidents were of violent assault (by Hindu extremists in 99% of cases): most beatings were severe.

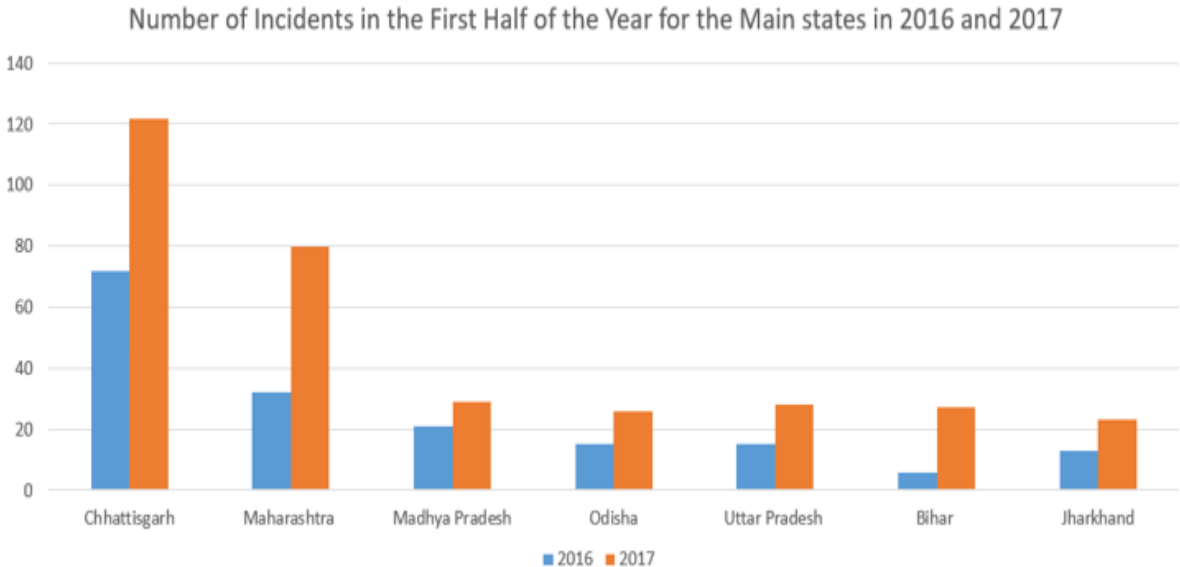
In 32 of them, Christians would have died if timely medical-aid had not been provided.

A local partner told Open Doors, "When Christians are beaten up by extremists, they are injured mostly on their heads or vital body parts. There was one incident earlier this year when the victim was attacked by a sword to his head. He was bleeding profusely and was critically injured... Attackers do not care if the person dies. They know they will not be punished because the Government (and hence the judiciary) will take their side. In most cases attackers go unpunished."

In 37 incidents, victims were socially boycotted, or threatened with it, by Hindu villagers if they didn't change their religion back to Hinduism.

In a further 34 incidents, victims were forced to leave their homes since they didn't want to leave Christianity. (In 14 of these, victims had to completely leave their village or city.)

The number of incidents against Christians in the six-most-populous Indian states has also been recorded.



The increase in persecution incidents in India has never been at such a great rate, say analysts.

In Maharashtra, which last week passed a bill to criminalise social exclusion based on religion, caste or race, 80 incidents against Christians were recorded (32 last year).

In Chhattisgarh, one of five states to have an 'anti-conversion' law, 122 incidents were recorded (72 last year).

This week, [Jharkhand is the latest state to bring to its Parliament a bill for a similar "anti-conversion" law.](#)

### **'Hindunisation'**

Although the current ruling party, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party), talks about secularism and unity, the background reality is that it is a centre-right party built as the political wing of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). RSS, a Hindu nationalist organisation, is widespread and openly upholds Hindu values and a conservative agenda.

So India is in a process of "Hindunisation", born from the "Hindutva" ideology (literally: "Hindu principles") of nationalism, which holds that the Indian nation can be a cohesive and aspiring force only if the tenets of one religion, one culture, and one nation are maintained.

RSS founder M.S. Golwalker identified five defining features of the Hindu nation – geographical unity, racial unity, cultural unity, linguistic unity, and the slogan "Hindu, Hindi, and Hindustan".<sup>1</sup> He said:

"The non-Hindu people in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and revere Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but the glorification of the Hindu religion, that is, they must not only give up their attitude of intolerance and ingratitude towards this land and its age-long tradition, but must also cultivate the positive attitude of love and devotion instead; in one word they must cease to be foreigners or may stay in the country wholly subordinated to the Hindu nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment – not even citizens' rights".<sup>2</sup>

One Christian leader said, "Before I converted to Christianity, I used to be a staunch Hindu. I also joined RSS at that time and started working with them. The party upholds Hindutva ideology and believes that if Christians in India aren't controlled, they would convert all the Hindus in the country and Hindutva would lose its identity. Hence RSS wants to do their best to stop Christians from preaching about their faith. They would go to any extremes for that. I myself persecuted many Christians until I came to the Christian faith and realised what I had been doing."

The BJP, led by the federal Prime Minister Narendra Modi, rules many states. Modi categorically denies persecution of Christians or other minorities. During a TV show he said he has no knowledge of the burning of churches or other types of persecution<sup>3</sup>. It has been said by an official linked to Hindu extremists that India should be "free of Christians by 2021".

Meanwhile, Christians face social exclusion, expulsion from villages, detention, threats, abuse, physical violence and sometimes killings. Open Doors' partners have identified a pattern. They say:

***Hindu extremists apply a five step process to 'bring Christians home':***

- 1.** Pastor is chased out of the community. Church members not allowed to contact him or to leave their village and worship with other Christians.
- 2.** Extremists prevent Christians from participating in the society. They are not allowed to have a government job, trade, draw water from the well, buy food and other products from local stores or even to talk to other people in the village.
- 3.** As the numbers show, physical violence happens more frequently too. Families are threatened, Christians are beaten up, girls and women may be raped, children may be kidnapped.
- 4.** At some point, the Hindu priest will come to indoctrinate Christians, to remind them that they were born as Hindus and to persuade them to come back to the religion of their community.
- 5.** If they still resist, they are often forcibly taken from their house, pushed into a Hindu procession and dragged to a temple. There they have to bow to idols, recite scriptures and are often smeared with cow dung and/or cow urine (to "cleanse" them).

***Timeline showing treatment of Christians and associated political factors***

**1964-1996:** 38 incidents. Violence against Christians and other minorities scarce. (1980s until 1996: BJP had only two seats in parliament).

**1996:** BJP won the elections for the first time, but government didn't last very long.

**1998:** BJP formed a coalition, the National Democratic Alliance.

**1999-2001:** Real violence started: 417 registered acts of violence. (Thirty three Christians killed, including 58-year-old Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons, burnt alive in his car.)

**2004:** the BJP and their coalition partners suffered a surprising defeat. Violence against Christians decreased.

**2014:** BJP in power; an immediate rise in persecution incidents.

"This is an alarming trend," an Open Doors spokesman said. "Hindunisation of India continues to be the main reason for the increase of persecution of Christians in India. If it continues to be forced, violence against Christians and other minorities will increase too.

"India used to be an example of religious freedom and tolerance. We call upon India and the international community to do everything in their power to protect millions

persecuted because of their faith. Hate campaigns should stop and police should act against anyone who harms another because of his or her faith.”

Despite Prime Minister Modi’s denial of Christian persecution, India’s Christians have lobbied him to bring in a [new law to stop targeted violence against religious minorities](#).

The National Council of Churches in India (NCCI), which represents 14 million Protestant and Orthodox Christians, said in an open letter to Mr Modi that they are “exasperated” that “state and central governments are not taking severe action against the different expressions of vigilantism,” adding that “mere words of condemnation are not enough”.

In July, the Indian Minister of State, [Hansraj Gangaram Ahir](#), said in parliament: “I don’t think there is a need for a separate law,” when talking about a mob lynching, adding that existing laws can deal with it.

The NCCI letter, which comes in the wake of the [July murder of a church leader in Punjab state](#), urged the Prime Minister to “not only enact the law but also implement it,” or use existing laws to punish the perpetrators, said Roger Gaekwad, NCCI General Secretary. Gaekwad had also written to Modi on Good Friday (14 April), [criticising the Prime Minister’s electioneering slogan](#) for a “new India”, *Achhe din aane waale hain* (“good days are coming”), saying “many people who belong to your government, party, and other like-minded bodies give us a different picture of *Achhe din* ...where the [constitutional] values of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity are stifled. Vigilantism has become a popular methodology of such persons and bodies”.

Meanwhile [101 Indian Christian intellectuals](#) have signed an open letter to the Catholic Bishops, expressing concern about the country’s move away from secular democracy to Hindu nationalism, and the consequent undermining of the country’s constitution, urging them to join the struggle to protect constitutional values. “The political process taking shape today is against every fundamental humane and constitutional principle of equality and dignity of every Indian ... Indeed it is evil,” the letter said.

The intellectuals point to collusion of the state in acts of violence on minorities. “Official machinery often seems to be working in tandem with the vigilantes. Street lynching, victims charged as accused, stage-managed trials; all on the basis of religious and caste identities. The Church needs to act before it is too late,” the letter urged.

Also, India’s Catholic Bishops are encouraging all Christians in India to mark 10 August as a “[black day](#)” to highlight discrimination suffered by Dalit Christians in India for 67 years. On that day in 1950 the president signed a constitutional order saying only Hindus could be considered a member of the “scheduled” caste (i.e. disadvantaged people, referred to as Dalits in most Indian states), and so allowing only Hindus access to constitutional benefits, such as jobs given through a process of positive discrimination. The order has since been modified to include Sikhs and Buddhists, but not Christians and Muslims.

1. Lancy Lobo, [Globalization, Hindu Nationalism and Christians in India](#), (New Delhi, Rawat Publication, 2002), 59.
2. Partha Gohsh, [BJP and the Evolution of Hindu Nationalism](#), (Delhi: Manohar Publication, 1999), 48.
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a5cewjQ026k>

## **Christians in shock after pastor shot dead in 'safe' Punjab**

World Watch Monitor (17.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2vviq8D> - The Christian community in Ludhiana, the largest city in India's north-western state of Punjab, is in shock after a pastor was shot dead outside his Pentecostal church on Saturday evening (15 July).

Sultan Masih, 47, who also ran a school for the poor, was gunned down by two people on a motorbike, who shot him at close range outside the Temple of God Church, where he was senior pastor. He suffered multiple wounds to his body and head.

Hundreds of Christians took to the streets on Sunday (16 July), blocking off a major national highway (the road to Jalandhar) for three hours, and only ceasing once they had received assurances from the police that the perpetrators would be brought to justice.

"Pastor Sultan Masih was my neighbour and my friend," fellow pastor Paul Tamizharasan told World Watch Monitor following the funeral today (17 July).

"Family members are grieving and we hope the government will catch the accused. We demand answers and have gone to the Punjab government, but they couldn't find who did this.

"The state of Punjab is very safe in India for Christians. There are Sikhs living here – they are also a religious minority in India. We are also a minority, but never before have we had any threats. But unfortunately this has happened and we are all shocked about how this is possible. Nobody knows how this can happen.

"Two people came by bike. Every Saturday, the pastor, after finishing his Sunday-service preparations, at 8.30pm he will come out. As usual, he had been talking with people outside, very casually. Then at 8.45, two people came very near, about 2-3 feet, and they shot his leg, and his face and his chest."

CCTV cameras recorded footage of the attack, but a police spokesman said it was too dark to make out the attackers' faces.

Masih had been pastor of the church for 20 years and also ran a school for the poor from inside the church. He is survived by his wife, Sarabjit, and sons, Elisha, 26, and Hanok, 18.

According to [The Tribune](#), the Punjab Chief Minister, Amarinder Singh, has promised 500,000 rupees (around \$8,000) for Masih's widow and a guaranteed job with the police for one of Masih's sons. He also promised that the killers would be brought to justice.

Some reports say that Masih had received threats before his death. The police denied this but refused to rule out "terror" as a possible motive. Meanwhile the Punjab Pradesh Congress Committee said the attackers were trying to "disturb the peace" and called on the Christian community to "maintain the peace".

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## **BJP candidate favourite to win India's presidential election**

World Watch Monitor (17.07.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2toQiPy> - Today (17 July) Indian lawmakers are expected to elect Bihar Governor Ram Nath Kovind as the nation's next president in a move that will strengthen the position of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist party.

According to [Reuters](#) the victory of the candidate put forward by Modi's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is almost certain "because the electoral college, consisting of members of both houses of the federal parliament and state assemblies across the country, is loaded in favour of the BJP". Voting takes place today and a result can be expected on Thursday (20 July).

Seventy-one-year-old Kovind's potential appointment as India's next president has worried religious minorities, after the former MP and governor of the eastern state of Bihar said that "Islam and Christianity are alien to the nation".

"With a radical Hindu President, as well as a radical Hindu Prime Minister, religious minorities will have no-one left to appeal to if they feel under pressure," according to Rolf Zeegers, analyst at Open Doors' World Watch Research unit.

However, the fact that Kovind is from the lowest Dalit caste might mean he "will understand more than anyone else the problems still tied to castes in India", says journalist John Dayal, speaking with news agency Fides.

Minority groups in the country, like the Dalits, Muslims and Christians, are often under pressure because of their faith; they can experience arbitrary arrests and violent attacks.

### **'Atmosphere of fear'**

The BJP's presidential candidate reportedly has his roots in the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), or National Volunteers' Association, a right-wing, paramilitary volunteer organisation, which has long supported the idea of India becoming a Hindu nation. One of his close acquaintances, preferring to remain anonymous, recently [told The Times of India](#): "Though Kovind has not been an active member of RSS per se, he has always been ideologically on the same boat".

[Reuters notes](#) that this is especially concerning "at a time when the Modi government is pursuing a partisan agenda and Hindu hardliners have whipped up an atmosphere of fear among the country's minorities".

It is for this reason that most Christians and other minorities in the country favoured Kovind's opponent, Meira Kumar, 72. The opposition's candidate condemned the "prevailing atmosphere of fear" in India, saying: "Earlier there were religious beliefs and practices, but we never witnessed such an atmosphere of fear", reports the website [News Nation](#).

Kumar's chances are thought to be miniscule, but the voting takes place by secret ballot and India's politicians have a record of shifting loyalties.

### **The right to be free**

Kumar, the first female speaker of the parliament and constitutional lawyer, was put forward by an opposition consisting of the centrist Congress and communist parties. Kumar's party, the Indian National Congress, primarily endorses social liberalism – seeking to balance individual liberties and social justice – and secularism.

In May, Modi's government introduced a ban on the sale of cattle for slaughter. This led to violent clashes between self-appointed "cow protectors" who attacked Muslims and Dalits over rumours that they had sold, bought, or killed cows for beef, as Human Rights Watch reported. Cows are considered sacred in Hinduism, India's main religion, but millions of Indians, including Dalits, Muslims and Christians, have long consumed beef. It is one of the cheapest meats available, making it an attractive source of protein for India's poor.



India's Supreme Court suspended the ban on 13 July, saying it was a fundamental right and freedom of every citizen to choose their own food.

In response to an increase of inter-religious violence, thousands of people, including church groups and representatives of civil society, gathered in cities across India to protest against mounting religious intolerance and to express solidarity with the victims of the violence, under the banner "Not in My Name".

### **'A fight between two ideologies'**

Kumar, who like Kovind is from a Dalit background, says the election is not merely about two candidates fighting for presidency, but "a fight [between] two ideologies".

"I am fighting an ideological battle," she said. "I am fighting for the ideology of equality, democratic values, freedom of expression and speech."

Fr Suresh Mathew concurred, [telling Fides](#): "One should not look at the presidential vote as a confrontation between two Dalits or between a man and a woman. It is rather a battle between two divergent and distinct ideologies. Kovind has a 'saffron' agenda [a symbol of Hindu radical groups]; Kumar is a person who defends the ideals and values of our constitution, which is [secular]" – meaning that it does not discriminate between religions.

Under India's constitution, the executive power is with the Prime Minister and the council of Ministers. The primary duty of the President is to preserve, protect and defend the constitution and the law. Reuters writes that some presidents, like the current president Pranab Mukherjee, have tried to use "their constitutional authority as the head of state to defend India's founding principles as a secular and diverse democracy".

### **'Alarming'**

The result of this election is seen as critical, as India's secular foundations are under increasing strain. Although freedom of religion is guaranteed by the country's constitution, seven Indian states have so-called "anti-conversion laws" in place, making conversion from Hinduism a punishable act if done through "force, allurement or appeasement".

On average, more than 15 Christians were attacked every week in India in 2016, according to the charity Open Doors. For some of them, their 'offence' was leaving Hinduism to become a Christian.

India is 15th on Open Doors' 2017 World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most difficult to live as a Christian. Their churches, symbols and festive holidays have been threatened, as have their lives.

At the presentation of a report at the European Parliament last month, Peter Van Dalen, Dutch MEP and co-chair of the Intergroup on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Religious Tolerance, said: "Since Narendra Modi rose to power with his nationalist party in 2014, the situation has become worse and worse, and now the position of religious minorities has become even more alarming."

Journalist John Dayal adds: "We ask candidate Kovind, who remains the favourite: do you think that Indian Muslim citizens and Christians, defined as 'worshippers of foreign religions', will continue to enjoy full citizenship, including the freedom to practice and preach their faith?"



## India arrests Christians for taking kids to Bible Camp

The Christian Post (30.05.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2saHbki> - Government authorities in India have arrested as many as 11 people for transporting dozens of Christian children to a Bible camp this month in the predominantly-Hindu Madhya Pradesh state, and have charged them with kidnapping and attempting to convert Hindu children.

The New Indian Express reports that chaperones associated with a Bible camp in Nagpur were arrested earlier this month while transporting at least 71 children to the camp in two separate incidents on May 21 and May 22.

On May 21, the Railway Protection Force and Government Railway Police stopped the group of 60 children between the ages of 13 and 15 who were traveling with nine chaperones at a train station in Ratlam.

After the chaperones told authorities that they were taking the children to the summer camp in Nagpur, the authorities checked to make sure that there was a summer camp in Nagpur. However, the authorities learned that there was only a Bible camp happening from May 22–25.

According to a police official, chaperones Vijay Meda, Nitin Mandor, Lalu Bhamore, Pangu Singh Vasuniya, Akash Jodiya, Sharmilla Damor, Savita Bhuria and Amia Pal were then arrested and charged last Tuesday. The suspects have been placed in judicial custody.

The New Indian Express reports that parents of the children who were detained on May 21 have rejected the idea that the chaperones were trying to convert their children because they, too, are already Christians.

Yet, the government maintains that the chaperones are still guilty of violating the Madhya Pradesh Religious Freedom Act because the children's parents did not follow the proper procedure of changing their official religion to Christianity, thus making their children Hindu under law.

The children have since been returned to their parents.

"For changing to another religion, one needs to submit a written application to the district collector and only after the stipulated process, a person can change religious identity, which didn't happen in the case of any of the parents claiming to be Christians," police superintendent Krishnaveni Desavatu told The New Indian Express. "This is why, the children and their parents will be officially treated as Hindu tribals and not Christians."

The Catholic media outlet Crux reports that poor and lower-caste residents who try to convert to smaller denominations often face obstacles when trying to follow the government's conversion procedure.

On May 22, two other men affiliated with the Bible camp — Alkesh and Harun Dabar — were arrested in Indore while transporting 11 other children aged between 11 and 17 to that same Bible camp.

"The Indore and Ratlam cases, which are related, have prima facie established an organised attempt by the Gujarat-based organisation to convert the tribal children from Madhya Pradesh to Christianity at the special prayers camp whose caretaker, Vincent Patil, too has been grilled by our team in Nagpur," Desavatu said.

According to Open Doors USA, India is one of the worst places for Christians to live, as it ranks on the [2017 World Watch List](#) as the 15th worst country in the world when it comes to the persecution of Christians.

According to Crux, Christians in India suffer from various forms of harassment and violence that is driven by accusations from Hindu nationalists that Christians are using questionable tactics to convert Hindus, who make up over 90 percent of the Madhya Pradesh state.

"The traumatization of these tribal and Dalit children from the villages of western Madhya Pradesh is symptomatic of the paranoia and targeted hate that is currently sweeping across north India," John Dayal, spokesperson for the United Christian Forum and a former president of the All India Catholic Union, told Crux. "No laws were broken by anyone in this instance, as indeed in incidents of anti-Christian violence in recent weeks."

"These are Christian children going to a summer camp in Nagpur. The involvement of the police and local civil authorities needs closer study," Dayal added. "Apart from rampant impunity and turning a blind eye to [Hindu nationalist] violence, the law and order institutions have been heavily infiltrated and radicalized under almost 15 years of Bharatiya Janata Party rule in Madhya Pradesh."

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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>

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## 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](#).

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## 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/2iffctL> - 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.

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## **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."

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