

## **Table of Contents**

- ***Hindu teenager is arrested for arson attack on priests car***
  - ***Seven pastors arrested in India for 'forced conversion'***
  - ***Hindu Patriarch beats family and throws them out of his home for converting to Christianity***
  - ***Uncertain fate for Rohingya Hindus in India***
  - ***Thousands protest jailing of Christians who were accused of offering money to convert villagers in India***
  - ***Jharkhand becomes ninth state in India to pass anti-conversion law***
  - ***Pastors in India put trust in God amid persecution***
  - ***Modi accused of hypocrisy after BJP bulldozes through India's latest 'anti-conversion law'***
  - ***Indian Christians faced almost as many attacks in first half of 2017 as all of 2016***
  - ***Christians in shock after pastor shot dead in 'safe' Punjab***
  - ***BJP candidate favourite to win India's presidential election***
  - ***India arrests Christians for taking kids to Bible Camp***
  - ***Uttar Pradesh: Christian graves vandalized (video) and false accusations of forced conversions***
  - ***Report examines legal restrictions religious minorities face***
  - ***Witnesses may challenge SC anthem order***
  - ***Supreme Court decides use of religion to gain electoral votes is corrupt practice***
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## **Hindu teenager is arrested for arson attack on priests car**

British Pakistani Christians (19.12.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2krHMsp> - All 32 Indian Christians from Madhya Pradesh who were arrested for blasphemy and false conversions on Thursday 14th December whilst singing carols were set free from Satna Jail on Friday after intense police questioning. Eight priests who were sent to help release the 32 victims from prison on Friday morning were also arrested despite being victims of violence that resulted in their vehicle being torched. They have now also been released, however 6 of the 8 priests have been placed on bail with an impending court hearing regarding an alleged forced conversion.

In more promising news an 18-year-old was arrested on Saturday 16th December for setting fire to the vehicle of the 8 priests who were accused by rightwing group Bajrang Dal (Hindu Nationalist Group) of forcing religious conversions.

The incident all began after a group of men linked to Bajrang Dal stormed the venue of a pre-Christmas celebration at Bhoomkar village on Thursday evening, and alleged that religious conversions was being organised there. The event, had been organised for children by the Syro-Malabar Church and had been a tradition for over 30 years.

A mob of over 100 Bajrang Dal activists allegedly assaulted the Christian groups outside the police station and inside the station right before the eyes of local police officers, but no arrests have taken place for any of the attackers.

A case has been filed against an elderly priest named M George, who teaches at St Ephrem's Theological College and 5 others, following a complaint by a local, Dharmendra Dohar, who alleged that he was illegally converted on December 10 and was paid Rs. 5,000 for it. They were booked under the Freedom of Religion Act and Sections 153-B (disharmony) and 295-A (religious blasphemy) of the Indian Penal Code.

"He was given a holy dip in a pond and his name was changed to Dharmendra Thomas, the complainant said. They also asked him to pray to Lord Christ," Superintendent of Police DD Pandey told press on Friday. A surprising comment considering Catholics do not practice full water immersion for the ritual of Baptism - a practice common in protestant churches.

In an interview on India's NDTV Dharmendra Dohar was asked if he had, indeed, changed his religion, Dharmendra Dohar - who claimed to have been a member of the Bajrang Dal for a year - told reporters, "I can't speak on this... If I do, I will get embroiled in the issue... it will be said that I'm changing my statement". The "group", he said, doesn't want "such people (Christians) to come in here". The comment was noted to be a stark change to his original adamant behaviour and comment at the time of the arrests and Mr Dohar could be seen looking sheepish throughout the interview.

Madhya Pradesh is ruled by the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party and has strict religious conversion laws. The central Indian state is one of five Indian states where missionaries need permission to try and convert individuals. In order to change religions, citizens must give a formal notice to local administrators at least one month before changing their faith officially.

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the BPCA, said:

"These fortunate Carol singers have been released from prison before Christmas and can now spend time with their families and with God, as they put the nightmare persecution they faced behind them.

"Father George and the other 5 accused under overtly false allegations must now face a trial despite the change of stance from the original material witness, who described a ritual practice that is not pertinent to the Catholic faith. This legal faux pas emphasises the pathetic nature of India's judicial process.

"The teenager caught being involved in the arson attack must be prosecuted with the utmost severity that is possible. It is the aura of impunity that exacerbates zealot passion and this can only be curbed through the rule of law.

"It raises my ire that no other members of the violent mob have been arrested, the innocent Christian men were brutalised by a mob in excess of 100 hysterical Hindus, who seemed intent on extra-judicial murder. The attack occurred before police yet they were unable to identify any of the perpetrators. I have to summarise, that it probably did not help the investigation when some eyewitnesses noticed that some of the police were complicit with the crime.

"I will be praying for the brave Indian and Pakistani Christians who continue to uphold God and practise their faith, despite the overt persecution they suffer. Their brave example is a reminder to us all that nothing on this earth can terminate God. No man can defeat our sovereign Lord who reigns eternally."

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## Seven pastors arrested in India for 'forced conversion'

By Wilson Chowdhry

British Pakistani Christians (06.12.2017) - Seven Pastors were arrested Monday 4th December and detained for allegedly carrying out a 'Forcible Conversion Campaign' in Mathura a district of Uttar Pradesh in Northern India. On Tuesday they were produced at court and were remanded in Judicial custody and today (Wednesday 6th December) all seven pastors have been refused bail.

Police were called by local villagers who were concerned about the activities of the seven pastors in an area in the district called Irauli Gurjar for the past month. The pastors have been accused of sharing blasphemous words towards the Hindu faith and of sharing 'evil bibles.' One of the accusers has also stated that when local Hindus refused to accept the content of speeches and 'religious book', that the pastors reverted to violence to forcibly convert people from Scheduled Castes (lowers castes or untouchables) to Christianity. Around 700 of these Scheduled caste individuals are said to reside in the area of Irauli Gurjar.

After police received a call for one of the local villagers, who himself was not from the scheduled castes, they immediately arrived at the village and booked the seven unsuspecting pastors. All seven of the pastors have been charged under section 295A of the Indian Penal Code, which deals with 'deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings' said Superintendent of Police (SP) Adiya Shukla.

Family members of Pastor Stanley Jacob (one of those arrested), tell a very different story. They state that a woman named Mamta who recently moved to the village after marrying a local man named Pradeep Singh both of whom recently converted to Christianity, invited the missionaries to her house for prayers on the Monday. Mamta's sister had also recently converted to Christianity but all these conversions had caused upset within Mamta's family. The pastors visited the house to hold a house meeting and share the gospel, pray and distribute bibles with local people who had been responding to invites to the meeting.

However while the house church service was underway some locals crashed the meeting and started to hurl abuse towards the seven Pastors. Responding to a call by Pradeep's uncle Lal Singh, police also arrived at the house and arrested the pastors. Lal Singh has filed a formal complaint despite no even being present at the meetings or hearing any of the blasphemous content directly. In his complaint he has said that he has been told that the blasphemy and forced conversions were being imposed on scheduled caste Hindus, by those who were in attendance.

The Pastors arrested include:

Stanley Jacob from Kerala who was part of a Ministry in Delhi named 'Masih Ghar' (Messiah House)  
David from New Dehli  
Vijay Kumar from Odisha  
Amit from Mathura  
Sumit Varghese and Anita from Hathras  
Dinesh from Rajasthan

Despite the flimsy allegations all seven pastors have failed to obtain bail from the Police jail and will be applying for bail at the Sessions Court in Mathura tomorrow. All seven

Pastors have asked for prayers that bail is granted. BPCA would like to help the families of the pastors with the costs for a solicitor and other costs they have incurred.

Pastor Naresh, British Asian Christian Association, lead officer in India, said:

"I can't express the frustration I feel for these pastors, words simply cannot convey the anger I feel when I think of their unwarranted arrest, based on the lies of local people fearful of the Gospel message of Christ.

"Men trying to save the lives and the souls of other are arrested on the whim of extremists, but they never lose their calling or faith.

"Being a Pastor in India is becoming a nightmare role, persecution here is reaching the levels that were present at the time of Paul.

"We will do what we can for these Pastors, already I have counselled a few of the families and I am going to visit them and see what other support we can offer including support for legal fees. However, there are wives and children who await news daily fearful of what will happen to the patriarch of their family. Its is simply a devastating situation."

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the British Asian Christian Association, said:

"These arrests so close to Christmas are going to hurt the affected families badly. A time of joy for so many, Christmas this year for the Pastors arrested and their families will be a time of anxiety and fear.

"India continues it's trajectory towards despair, the caste system is gaining renewed impetus destroying the lives of disenfranchised citizens simply for the families they were born into. Worse still every minority living in the midst of the Hindu majority are living through a time of increased suspicion and animosity.

"Whilst Narendra Modi remains in power the country will only become even more polarized, his regime simply desires the eradication of non-Hindus and as time progresses, the influence of the hatemongers becomes palpably stronger.

"If the seven Pastors are refused bail tomorrow, the Mathura courts will be illustrating that Indian law now deems Christians as pariah's within the state."

[Sign the petition for their release here](#)

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## **Hindu Patriarch beats family and throws them out of his home for converting to Christianity**

By Wilson Chowdhry



British Pakistani Christian Association (18.11.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2AsG7wg> - A family of five in the State of Haryana in Northern India is struggling to make ends meet as winter approaches after refusing to give up their Christian faith at the behest of the family patriarch. The patriarch namely Ramesh Kumar, a Hindu, is scandalized by his family coming to faith in Jesus Christ which is a very common occurrence in India despite the risks. In many States anti-conversions laws exist, changing one's faith from Hinduism is abhorred and can lead to extreme violence.

In February of this year Mr Kumar, a married father of four, decided he could no longer tolerate his family's attendance at a local church, and demanded that they cease observing Christian worship. When they did not give in to his demand he began beating his wife and children and despite his well paying job as a government employee he cut them off financially, then officially repudiated them on 25 September.

Mr Kumar stopped providing for their basic needs so his oldest son Neeraj (23 y/o) used his meager income as a shop clerk to provide for his mother and three siblings who all remain students. They also received some intermittent help from a maternal uncle when these wage earnings were not quite enough.

Not satisfied with this hardship he had put on his children, Ramesh Kumar approached his son's employer the 30th of October to interfere with Neeraj's ability to feed his mother, brother and sisters. As a result of his father's effort to malign his character and out fear for attracting further trouble, the owner told Neeraj that he could no longer work at the shop.

On 15 November Mr Kumar escalated his assault and summarily said, "If you did not stop going to church. I will drive you out from the house and file an [apostasy] case against you all since you have changed your religion."

Mr Kumar finally submitted a complaint to the police station in which he fabricated a story claiming that his family would, "take me church forcefully" and "want me to change my religion" . Mr Kumar further concocted that when he refused to do that his "family members tied my legs and hands and took me to the Church," Falsely alleging that, "My son said if you will not go to Church with us then we can kill you."

Three times the entire family were called into the police station for questioning and asked, "Why you have changed your religion and beat your father?" But the police refused to believe any statement that they made in their own defence and joined in pressuring the family to meet the father's demands to stop attending church. All five believing members of the family are under great pressure to give up their faith, as the



apparent. They have been abandoned by the community because of their faith and no one [except Pastor Ramesh] is coming forward to help them."

Wilson Chowdhry, Chairman of the British Asian Christian Association, said:

"The disownment of his children by a patriarch has left this family very vulnerable. They have been targeted by a father who is caught up in the religious zeal that has become more commonplace in India since the Modi regime came into power.

"Proliferation of anti-minority propaganda, and a biased national curriculum that continues to demonize other faiths, has had the effect of polarizing communities. Moreover a growing number of incidents of minority persecution, is a poor indictment of Indian society which lacks harmony and tolerance in many regions.

"The Indian Government must retract the anti-conversion bill or the future for Christians and other minorities in their nation will remain bleak, as the law will serve as a weapon for extremists."

**Anti-conversion laws are contrary to Article 18 of the UN Human Rights Convention which India has ratified. Please sign our petition calling for India to remove it ([click here](#)).**

The family have asked for help with their financial situation as they find themselves in severe difficulties. The son is actively seeking work and we would like to support the family for 12 months, while they find their feet.

On 5<sup>th</sup> November Pastor Ramesh helped them to find a rented house. Rent is 3500 Rupees (£40) per month. Since they did not have a gas cylinder, stove and utensils, Pastor Ramesh gave them his, so he now no longer has anything to cook with himself. The Pastor also asked other believers to help them but they are also poor and could not help them very much. Now winter has started and they do not have enough blankets or bedding to protect themselves from the cold. A few beds have been loaned by Neighbors for the time being but they have to be returned.

Neeraj is not able to pay for his siblings school and transport fees. His brother Pardeep school fee is 650 (£8) per month (Class 10<sup>th</sup>) and 600 Rupees (£7) Rupees for transport, his youngest sister Gaytari total monthly school fees come to 1100 Rupees (£13) (Class 11<sup>th</sup>), while his sister Sapna is studying in preparation for her Grade 12 Final Exams. Neeraj was working as a shop clerk before this incident happen but his father told the shop owner the false report. Neeraj's employer told him that he could not work for them anymore because of what his father said and that does not want to have any trouble. This young man now has the major problem of needing to pay for food, rent, three folding beds, warm bedding and the school fees for the younger siblings without a job.

Neeraj's Father is also laying blame on Pastor Ramesh saying that the minister has converted his family and has disturbed his home life. Consequentially, the police are repeatedly calling Pastor Ramesh into the police station, somewhere his lawyer has advised him against going. Their clear intention is to arrest Pastor Ramesh on trumped up charges and incite people against him.

**If you would like to sponsor this family please donate by clicking ([here](#))**

**Anti-conversion laws are contrary to Article 18 of the UN Human Rights Convention which India has ratified. Please sign our petition calling for India to remove it ([click here](#)).**

Paul warned Christians that choosing Christ would result in persecution in his letter to

Timothy, and across the world we are seeing evidence of the rise in attacks of Christians, who are by far the most persecuted faith. Please continue to pray for our Persecuted brothers and sisters in Pakistan and India.

Ramesh is the name of the Patriarch and also the Pastor's name.



***The family of four children and a wife that Mr Ramesh Kumar has disowned.***



***Pastor Naresh speaks with the family.***



***The family with Pastor Ramesh***



***BACA officer Pastor Naresh with Pastor Ramesh.***

## Indian Christians beaten 'with rods and sticks'

World Watch Monitor (17.10.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2yxVqul> - A Christian man involved in church work across ten villages in the southern Indian state of Telangana was severely beaten earlier this month, a source told World Watch Monitor.

The victim, known as Pastor Seviya, "was attacked by five Hindu extremists with rods and thick sticks ... until he became unconscious", the source said. The pastor was "in a critical stage for many days" in hospital because of head injuries sustained during the attack on 5 October. He had blood clots on the brain and bleeding from his ears, added the source.

A similar incident on 13 October left another church leader "bleeding profusely" and later hospitalised and needing 12 stitches to his head.

Pastor Khel Prasad Kurre was attacked by Hindu extremists in Chhattisgarh state on his way home after visiting a member of his church, a source told World Watch Monitor.

Kurre said three or four men called out to him while he was riding his motorcycle. When he stopped, the men rushed towards him and started beating him with sticks. Kurre shouted for help, and when people from the village arrived, his attackers fled, also stealing his phone.

When Kurre later reported the incident to the police, he was informed that his attackers had earlier visited the station to report that he was converting people to Christianity. Kurre said police officers threatened to arrest him on charges of luring people into Christianity and that this put him off filing an official complaint against his attackers.

Chhattisgarh is one of eight Indian states to have passed so-called 'anti-conversion laws', which ostensibly seek to eliminate forced conversions from one set of beliefs to another, but in reality dissuade all conversions.

Five of these states are led by the BJP – the Hindu nationalist party led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In Jharkhand, the most recent state to pass the law, senior church leaders recently called on the prime minister to help control the "[ideological hatred](#)" of [the state's BJP chief minister](#), who, a day before the bill was passed, published advertisements in daily newspapers using pictures of Mahatma Gandhi and a quote ridiculing missionaries carrying out "fraudulent conversions".

In two states 'anti conversion' laws are not active, while in a third, Himachal Pradesh, parts of the law were repealed after a court challenge was brought by the Evangelical Fellowship of India.

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## Uncertain fate for Rohingya Hindus in India

HRWF (13.10.2017) – Amongst the Rohingya Muslims fleeing ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, are Hindus, a religious minority that also has a long history in the country. Many Hindus have escaped to neighbouring Bangladesh and India. The majority of the persecuted communities have fled to Bangladesh, creating makeshift refugee camps.

In India, refugee Hindus are in a precarious situation. The Indian Supreme Court is currently debating the deportation of some 40,000 Rohingya Muslims from India. However, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) party has requested that the government protect the Rohingya Hindus seeking asylum.

In the previous months, the government has made policy changes to make the citizenship process easier for religious minorities from Bangladesh and Pakistan, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Christians amongst others.

Despite this previous support, the uncertainty of their fate remains as government officials share varying viewpoints on the situation of Rohingya Hindus. One anonymous senior home ministry official in New Delhi told NDTV:

"At this juncture we have no SOS calls from Hindus... Also, the Supreme Court is yet to decide whether India should deport Rohingya Muslims or not. The matter is sub-judice and any policy decision will be taken only after the court's order"

As Rohingya Hindus wait in limbo for the Supreme Court decision, the VHP is continuing efforts to advocate for their asylum in India. The VHP is expected to meet with the foreign ministers and high commissioners of Bangladesh and Myanmar to ensure the safety of Rohingya Hindus in the Rakhine state.

Sources:

<https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/vhp-seeks-safety-of-rohingya-hindus-in-bangladesh-myanmar-1756054>

<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/as-rohingya-muslims-face-uncertainty-myanmar-hindus-see-hope-in-india-1752903>

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## **Thousands protest jailing of Christians who were accused of offering money to convert villagers in India**

By Jardine Malado

The Christian Times (29.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2khpsEC> - Around 5,000 Christians gathered on the streets in India's Jharkhand state on Monday to protest the jailing of six Pentecostals who were accused of offering money to villagers to convert them to Christianity.

Five men and one woman were arrested from Tukupani village in Simdega district following a complaint from the village chief that some people were offering money to indigenous people to become Christians, according to UCA News.

The ecumenical "silent protest" that took place on Sept. 25 was organized after a local court rejected the bail application of the six Pentecostals on Sept. 21.

"We wanted them to be released because they are innocent people who gathered for a prayer," said Gladson Dungdung, a Catholic leader, who was one of the organizers of the protest.

Dungdung asserted that the district court rejected the bail "seemingly under pressure from higher ups," adding that the protesters will be appealing to a higher court.

The six Christians were charged with upsetting the religious feelings of others, according to district police chief Rajiv Ranjan Singh.

Bishop Vincent Barwa of Simdega expressed concern that an "atmosphere of suspicion" began to emerge in the state following the passage of the anti-conversion law on Aug.

12. He lamented that in several areas, Hindu groups "act as if they have a mandate to keep a check on others, especially Christians."

The new legislation prohibits conversion through force or allurement or fraudulent means, and it stipulates that those who want to convert to another religion should seek permission from the government. Those who were found to be in violation of the law could be jailed for three years and fined 50,000 rupees (US\$800).

The police officer noted that the six Christians were not booked under the provisions of the anti-conversion law, which is still not enforced as the government has not framed the necessary rules for the law to take effect.

Dungdung, however, contended that the arrest sends a "clear message that the new anti-conversion law will be used as a tool to check the activities of some people and groups. Christians will have a tough time ahead."

While India's national constitution guarantees freedom of religion, anti-conversion laws are currently in effect in six states, namely Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Himachal Pradesh.

The ruling Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has claimed that the tribal population of Jharkhand has been targeted by missionaries, noting that the Christian percentage of the tribal people has increased by nearly 30 percent since the last census.

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## **Jharkhand becomes ninth state in India to pass anti-conversion law**

***Over a quarter of Indian states have adopted laws prohibiting changing religions without notifying the government.***

By Arvin Valmuci

Sikh 24 (14.09.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2jGTD7I> - Jharkhand, in northern India, became the most recent state in the country to criminalize religious freedom when its governor, Draupadi Murmu, signed an anti-conversion bill into law on September 5.

Nine Indian states have passed nearly identical laws regulating religious conversion and requiring notification, or sometimes permission, of the local government before an individual can change his or her religion. After Jharkhand's new legislation, such laws are in effect in six states — of the other three states which passed so-called "anti-conversion" laws, one repealed it, one adopted it but has not framed rules for enforcement, and one adopted it but the governor never signed it.

"There is a growing movement to enforce anti-conversion laws that limit freedom of speech and religion," warned Anglican priest Fr. Joshua Lickter in an August speech about the recent assassination of Punjabi Pastor Sultan Masih. "There is an increased persecution, nationwide, of any religious minorities, be they Christian, Muslim, Sikh, or even Atheist."

Jharkhand is the sixth state since 2000 to pass anti-conversion legislation. Laws were adopted in Chhattisgarh in 2000, Tamil Nadu in 2002 (repealed in 2004), Gujarat in 2003, Himachal Pradesh in 2007, and Rajasthan in 2006 (not signed by governor). The earliest laws were adopted in Odisha in 1967, Madhya Pradesh in 1968, and Arunachal Pradesh in 1978 (rules not framed). One state (Gujarat) requires permission to convert, while six require notification (Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Tamil Nadu).

Thus, nine states have passed such legislation and eight have it on the books. Others may also soon seek to regulate conversion. After Jharkhand passed its law, political entities in Assam and Manipur, as well as Maharashtra, expressed strong interest in following suit.

Labeled "Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Bill, 2017," the law prohibits attempting to convert people "by the use of force or allurement or fraud." Its definition of force includes "threat of divine displeasure or social ex-communication," its definition of allurement includes "any material benefit," and its definition of fraud includes "misrepresentation." Penalties for violation are three years imprisonment and a 50,000 rupee fine or, if the convert is a minor, woman, or member of a Scheduled Caste or Tribe, four years imprisonment and a 100,000 rupee fine.

Since 2014, Jharkhand has been ruled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Speaking about the new law, the state's BJP spokesperson Pratul Shahdev says, "The anti-national forces involved in religious conversion in Jharkhand will now have to face a jail term. This is also a major setback for the opposition parties, who were raising such issues only to create impediments in the development of the state."

While Shahdev claims religious conversion is a national threat which hinders progress, other BJP officials are concerned that many tribal people (also known as Adivasis) and those treated as outcasts by the Hindu caste system (also known as Dalits) are choosing a different religion.

For instance, Radha Krishna Kishore, a member of Jharkhand's legislative assembly who serves as the BJP's chief whip, is worried by a purported 30 percent increase in the state's Christian population between 2001 and 2011. Kishore asks, "Who are the people being converted? The poor, the Dalit, and the tribal population living in interior areas." BJP State General Secretary Deepak Prakash continues, "Either through coercion or allurement, the gullible tribal people have been converted on a large scale. As a result, their society has got detached from its own roots and traditions. It is a good step to stop such forces who are involved in it."

"It would appear that anti-conversion laws in India are a race to woo, win, and occupy the tribal soul," writes journalist Neeraj Mishra. "The string of seven states — MP, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Himachal, Arunachal, Odisha and now Jharkhand — which have enacted anti-conversion laws are home to almost 90 percent of the tribal population of the country."

Opponents of Jharkhand's new law suggest the real motive for passage is to undercut political action by Adivasis. One of those is Hemant Soren, a leader of the regional political party, Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM). Formed to represent Adivasis and Dalits, the JMM currently holds 17 of 81 seats in Jharkhand's state assembly. Soren alleges, "[Chief Minister] Raghubar Das is doing this because Christian tribals, who are educated, helped raise awareness against his government's land-grab efforts."

In November 2016, the assembly amended the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act (1908) as well as the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act (1886). Passed by the British, these Acts restrict transfer of tribal lands to non-Adivasis. Amendments make it easier for the State to enact eminent domain and allow conversion of agricultural land to commercial use. Many worry this will lead to a State supervised seizure of tribal lands by corporations. "This is not an amendment but a plan to grab the tribal land and sell it to corporates," claims Adivasi-rights activist Sanjay Basu Mallick.

For months, Adivasis have protested the changes. In September, approximately 100,000 rallied in the state capital, Ranchi. In December, protests expanded as far as New Delhi. Phoolkeria Minz, the President of the Chotanagpur Working Women's Society, spoke in Delhi, declaring, "The rights of the oppressed, the marginalised have been overlooked. The industrialists come and take away our lands, and this is taking place with the

connivance of the BJP government.... The BJP has goaded the tribals like animals. We shall now rise like tigers to defend our territory.”

Meanwhile, Karma Oraon, representing a group called the Adivasi Sangharsh Morcha (Adivasi Struggle Front), argued at a protest in Ranchi, “The Chief Minister is threatening the minority community in the state. Instead of finding a solution to the rising protests over controversial land ordinance, he is trying to divert attention by raising the conversion issue.”

Mishra agrees that protests against land grabs are the real reason behind Jharkhand’s anti-conversion legislation. “Though the Christian population of Jharkhand is only 4 percent, it has been accused of fanning the rebellion against the land acquisition acts that Das’ government tried to bring in through the Chotanagpur land tenancy reform bill,” writes Mishra. “The government realises that the church uses every opportunity to become the defender of the rights of tribals.”

The BJP, however, insists that Adivasis need protection from what they portray as predatory practices of non-Hindu religious groups. As Prakash stated, for instance, “gullible tribal people have been converted.” John Dayal, Secretary General of the All India Christian Council, responded to such arguments in a 2015 interview. Passage of anti-conversion laws, he explains, “considered that any conversion, any change of faith was either because the man was a fool and had been duped or that he had a gun to his head.” He asked, “Why is the presumption that I have no reason, that I’m not a human being, that I have no free will?”

Political scientist Pratap Bhanu Mehta echoes Dayal’s perspective, suggesting, “Anti-conversion legislation is illegitimately paternalistic.” Analyzing a 1977 Indian Supreme Court ruling which upheld Madhya Pradesh’s law, Mehta writes, “The court construed the freedom of religion clause [in the Indian Constitution] simply as the right not to be targeted.... To have a right to exercise one’s religious beliefs just is the right not to have one’s sensibility offended, either by speech deemed insulting or being the target of conversion.”

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF), which supports anti-conversion legislation, advocates the same position. HAF insists that religious freedom is “compromised” because international law “fails to recognize... the right to retain one’s tradition and to be free from religious intrusion, harassment, intimidation, and exploitative and predatory proselytization.” Mehta describes this perspective as a belief “that the right to freedom of religion just means the right to freedom from other people’s religion.”

Expanding on his explanation, Mehta notes that the “real premise” of the Supreme Court’s ruling was that “mere mention of divine displeasure or rewards constituted an attempt to convert by fraud.” Exposing the paternalism of the ruling, he continues, “The court seems to assume throughout that people are somehow not capable of managing ‘religious’ ideas they receive, particularly if they are from lower castes.... The court assumes throughout that citizens are, when it comes to receiving religious speech, or speech about religion, incapable of managing the impressions they receive.”

Cardinal Telesphore Toppo, an Adivasi Christian from Ranchi, apparently agrees with Mehta that the anti-conversion laws are paternalistic. “We are a free people with a free will, and a free conscience, and free intelligence,” says Toppo.

As reported by the U.S. State Department, “Hindu nationalist organizations frequently alleged that Christian missionaries lured low-caste Hindus in impoverished areas with offers of free education and health care, and these organizations equated such actions with forced conversions.” However, as Toppo says, “No one can force anyone to convert.” Furthermore, continues the Cardinal, “Over the decades, we have been running many schools and colleges, healthcare facilities, and hospitals all over the state, serving the

poor, the downtrodden, and the forgotten. None of the millions of people whom we have served have been converted to Christianity.”

As the U.S. State Department also reported, entities like the BJP treat non-Hindus as foreign to India. Describing the political ideology of the BJP, Dayal says, it is “*Hindutva*, which is a militant religious nationalism which preaches hate. Which says Christians and Moslems are not nationalists, they’re not patriots, they’re aliens.” As he explains, “In some states, you have to inform the local government that you want to change your faith.... What will happen if you go to the magistrate and say, ‘I want to change my faith? Your neighbors will kill you in the night.... They will think you are a traitor.’”

“These anti-conversion laws are depicted as necessary to prevent intrusions by a foreign faith, but Christianity has a nearly 2,000 year old history in the Indian subcontinent,” remarks Pieter Friedrich, an analyst of South Asian affairs. “It traces back probably to two apostles of Jesus. Bartholomew went to Maharashtra. Thomas went to Kerala and, according to tradition, was martyred near present-day Chennai. Later, merchants emigrated from Syria and established the still thriving Syrian Christian community. So how can any sincere student of history consider Christianity as foreign or alien to India?”

The real issue, suggests Friedrich, is that Hindu nationalists fear Dalits and others treated as low-caste will flee the Hindu fold. “The BJP is terrified of people exercising their freedom of expression by changing their religion without State interference because they know it leaves the exit door open to all *Mulnivasi*— Dalits, Shudras, Adivasis — to shed their caste status by switching religions.” As evidence, he mentions the the Kandhamal riots.

In 2008, *Hindutva* activists staged a pogrom against Christians in Kandhamal, Odisha. Mobs killed more than 100, injuring 18,000, displacing 50,000, and torching a reported 4,640 homes, 252 churches, and 13 educational institutions. According to political scientist Dr. Pralay Kanungo, anger over conversions motivated the violence. “*Hindutva* organisations, engaged in converting tribals to Hinduism, accuse Christian missionaries of ‘forcing’ the Dalits to convert,” writes Kanungo. Yet, during the Odisha pogrom, mobs forced hundreds of Christians to renounce their faith and profess Hinduism. One Christian pastor, who was forcibly converted, reported, “They said, ‘If you don’t become Hindu, we’ll burn your houses too and start killing you.’”

Similarly, when mobs of BJP supporters torched around 20 churches in Gujarat in 1999, they justified their violence by blaming Christians for engaging in “false” conversions. A Roman Catholic spokesperson, Fr. Dominic Emmanuel, commented, “The issue is not conversion. It’s about some people wanting to hold onto a cultural hegemony. The oppressed are learning to demand their rights. This is what certain groups find objectionable.”

As Friedrich explains, “In an effort to impose a hegemonic Hindu culture, some willfully ignorant and intellectually dishonest people try to link the Christian religion to British imperialism, but it is a non-European faith which predates the English by eons. Christians worship a Jewish man who was born in the Middle East and whose followers first flourished in places like Ethiopia, Egypt, Turkey, Greece, and, of course, India. It is, however, a faith which urges people to respect and defend human dignity, and those who desire to maintain systems of oppression are often offended by that.”

“Any issue pertaining to religious freedom in India must be viewed within the context of caste discrimination,” reported UK-based human rights group Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) in 2006. “Embracement of ‘non-Indic’ religions by Dalits and tribals is perceived by Hindu fundamentalist groups as undermining the social structure of India, and as providing for their empowerment. From the perspective of many Dalit groups, religious freedom offers an escape from the subjugation associated with caste. With reference to India’s Christian population, an estimated 75% is of Dalit or tribal

background, and this demographic group is a chief victim of religiously motivated violence.”

Bhajan Singh, Founding Director of US-based Organization for Minorities of India (OFMI), believes anti-conversion legislation is rooted in a fear of people opposing oppression. “These laws criminalizing a person’s liberty to change their religion are a sign that Brahmanism is alive and well in modern India,” says Singh. “The Hindu nationalists holding the reigns of the Indian State are trying to prevent annihilation of the caste system by banning the *Mulnivasi* from voting against it with their feet.”

Singh further suggests a lack of insincerity in the move to pass anti-conversion laws. “The State does not hesitate to play the traditional smoke and mirrors games of Brahmanism by giving protection to the *deras* and bowing and scraping before perverted cult leaders like Ram Rahim. The BJP pretends to be worried about protecting so-called gullible tribals and Dalits, but they are happy to see the uneducated masses flock to the folds of these fake spiritual leaders. Pushing the *Mulnivasi* into the clutches of the *deras* helps the ruling elite to use the masses as vote banks and commodities to serve the sinister *Hindutva* agenda. They encourage *deras*, but despise real religions which teach the value of human beings. They cannot persuade people to remain outcastes, so they try to force it by criminalizing religious conversion.”

Arvin Valmuci, a Dalit activist who serves as a spokesperson for OFMI, calls the BJP hypocritical in its perspective on conversion. “Look at what the BJP’s idol, Prime Minister Modi, says about Dr. B. R. Ambedkar,” remarks Valmuci. “Modi says, ‘Babasaheb Ambedkar was the messiah of all the labourers in the country.’ Modi is such a hypocrite. When he was Chief Minister of Gujarat, Modi’s earliest action was to pass anti-conversion legislation. But what did Babasaheb do? He said, ‘Conversion is necessary to the Untouchables.’ Two months before he died, he led five lakhs Untouchables in religious conversion. Do you think they asked State permission first?”

Ambedkar, independent India’s first Law Minister and a champion of the civil rights of the Dalits, declared in 1935, “I was born a Hindu. I had no choice. But I will not die a Hindu because I do have a choice.” Before India gained independence, Ambedkar said, “Conversion is as necessary to the Untouchables as self-government is to India. The ultimate object of both is the same. There is not the slightest difference in their ultimate goal. This ultimate aim is to attain freedom.”

On October 14, 1956, Ambedkar publicly converted to Buddhism. During the ceremony, he took 22 vows, including vowing, “I renounce Hinduism, which disfavors humanity and impedes the advancement and development of humanity because it is based on inequality, and adopt Buddhism as my religion.” He was joined by approximately 500,000 Dalits.

Responding to those who criticized his decision to convert, Ambedkar explained, “Most of the present-day Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians in India were formerly Hindus, the majority of them being from the Shudras and Untouchables. Do these critics mean to say that those who left the Hindu fold and embraced Sikhism or Christianity have made no progress at all? And if this is not true, and if it is admitted that conversion has brought a distinct improvement in their condition, then to say that the Untouchables will not be benefited by conversion carries no meaning.”

Within 11 years of the Ambedkarite mass conversion movement, Odisha became the first state in the country to pass an anti-conversion law, calling it the “Orissa Freedom of Religion Act, 1967.” The law prohibited “conversion from one religion to another by the use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means.” All laws passed since Odisha’s 1967 legislation are similarly named as “Freedom of Religion” acts and are virtually identical in verbiage. When Madhya Pradesh became the second state to pass such a law, however, it included one significant difference — it required informing the State of any conversion.

Subsequently, in 2003, Gujarat became the first state to pass a law mandating permission from the State before converting.

According to political scientist Jennifer Coleman, "The goal has been essentially the same in each draft bill: to constrain the ability of communities and individuals to convert 'from the religion of one's forefathers,' often in the name of protecting those making up the 'weaker' or more easily 'influenced' sectors of society — namely women, children, backward castes, and untouchables." This is demonstrated in the laws passed by Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. In 2006, for instance, Chhattisgarh attempted to amend its law to redefine conversion by adding language stating that "the return in ancestor's original religion or his own original religion by any person shall not be construed as 'conversion'." Rajasthan's law defines conversion as "renouncing one's own religion" and defines "own religion" as "the religion of one's forefather."

Thus, as CSW reported in 2006, "The newly-enacted Rajasthan law is more overtly aimed at containing Dalits and tribals within the caste system by restricting conversions from the religion 'of one's forefathers'." In 2009, a corroborating United Nations report stated, "Some provisions are discriminatory in giving preferential treatment to re-conversions, for example by stipulating that returning to the forefathers' original religion or to one's own original religion shall not be construed as conversion." Furthermore, CSW explains, "None of the laws includes 're-conversion' under its definition. This category is used by Hindu fundamentalist groups to describe their own proselytism. Because the legislation does not stipulate conditions for re-conversions, it therefore inherently tends in favour of Hinduism and against minority religions."

"These laws are set up in such a way that the only real acceptable religion is Hinduism," says Fr. Lickter. His concern was shared by the previous pope, Benedict XVI. "No citizen of India, especially the weak and the underprivileged, should ever have to experience discrimination for any reason, especially based on ethnic or religious background or social position," declared Pope Benedict in 2006. "The disturbing signs of religious intolerance which have troubled some regions of the nation, including the reprehensible attempt to legislate clearly discriminatory restrictions on the fundamental right of religious freedom, must be firmly rejected."

However, attempts to suppress freedom of religion have increased and gained widespread State support. "Reconversion," also called *Ghar Wapsi* or "Home Coming," is pushed by some of India's most powerful politicians. One example is Yogi Adityanath in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

While serving as a BJP Member of Parliament in 2005, Adityanath led the "reconversion" of thousands. As reported by *Tehelka*: "In October 2005, he led a 'purification drive' in the district of Etah, converting 1,800 Christians to Hinduism. Earlier that year, he had converted 5,000 Dalit Christians in the same district." *Ghar Wapsi* drew international attention in 2014 after *Hindutva* activists forcibly converted 250 Muslims to Hinduism in Agra, Uttar Pradesh. Muslims who attended the conversion ceremony later revealed they were intimidated and promised government food ration cards in return for participating.

Adityanath welcomed the Agra ceremony, stating, "Conversions spoil communal amity in the country. It should be banned. If conversions continue, I feel *ghar wapsi* programme will continue." In 2015, he declared, "This is the century of *Hindutva*, not just in India but in the entire world." That same year, he announced his intention to introduce a national anti-conversion bill in Lok Sabha (the lower house of Parliament). Commenting on the bill, he said, "An aggressive campaign is required for *ghar wapsi* of those Hindus, who had converted to other religions in the past."

Finally, in March 2017, Modi picked Adityanath to serve as UP's Chief Minister, thus making him the head of the government of a state of 200 million people.

Anti-conversion laws, reports the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, “create a hostile and, on occasion, violent environment for religious minority communities because they do not require any evidence to support accusations of wrongdoing.” According to the United Nation’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Such laws or even draft legislation have had adverse consequences for religious minorities and have reportedly fostered mob violence against them.”

Some of those recently accused of violating anti-conversion laws include 10 pastors in Madhya Pradesh. While the pastors were supervising around 60 children during a bus trip to a Christian summer camp, they were stopped and arrested by police. All 10 reportedly remain imprisoned. David Robin, an attorney working on the case, says, “The root of the case is the allegation of conversion. However all the parents have stated that they are followers of Christ so how can the pastors be guilty of converting them or their children?”

Other incidents abound. Indian minorities are harassed even in states without anti-conversion laws. In Karnataka, on September 5, two women named Mercy and Roselina were detained by a mob who accused them of “visit[ing] six Hindu houses, when men were not in the house.” They were escorted to the local police station and interrogated. Also in Karnataka, on August 26, a man named Dorairaju was surrounded by a mob of about 20 people who accused him of bribing people to become Christians. The man, himself a convert, is now facing charges.

On June 25, six Christians were arrested in Uttar Pradesh when police invaded their worship service, charged them with “unlawful assembly,” and accused them of forcibly converting people. Pastor Asha Ram Sahni reported the lead officer repeatedly slapped him and said, “You are paid eight to 10 lakhs [US\$12,420 to US\$15,520] for converting people.” The pastor replied, “Sir, if I’m paid such hefty amounts, why would I live in a mud house? I follow Jesus Christ with all my heart, I serve Christ, I share the gospel, but I never forcefully converted anyone.”

“The *Hindutva* elements repeatedly parrot the line that religious choices must be regulated by the state to halt an imaginary wave of forced conversions,” says Friedrich. “Yet they never offer a shred of evidence that anyone is being forced — or paid — to convert. By passing these laws regulating conversion, though, Hindu nationalists are actually criminalizing their own ability to live and act as free people. They are conceding that State interference in a person’s thoughts and beliefs is legitimate. They are accepting restrictions on the freedom of thought. Rights are universal, and any right which is denied to minorities is *de facto* also denied to the majority. Do the nationalists really want to give up their own right to freedom of thought as a solution to a problem that doesn’t exist?”

Dayal offered a similar perspective. “They are not denying John Dayal, the Christian, freedom of faith,” says Dayal. “They’re denying it to the Hindus. It is the poor Hindu who is being told he cannot become anything else. That he has to remain where he was born forever and ever. He is being denied his free choice.... Even the upper-caste is being denied this freedom.”

Writing in opposition to passage of Tamil Nadu’s anti-conversion law in 2002, researcher Dr. Arpita Anant says, “Yes, forced conversions are wrong.” However, she is more offended by the denial of freedom to those trapped within the caste system. As she continues, “What is worse is forcing masses of people to accept their humiliating conditions without protest, when they seem to have made a conscious decision to opt out of the Hindu fold as a form of symbolic protest.”

These laws are intended to prevent individuals from easily leaving their ancestral religions — otherwise described as the “religion of one’s forefathers.” Yet Ambedkar responded to such arguments as early as 1936. “It cannot be denied that our ancestors lived in the ancient religion, but I cannot say that they remained there voluntarily,” he

said during a speech given in Mumbai. "Our ancestors were forced to live in that religion.... Only a fool can say that one should cling to one's own religion only because it is ancestral."

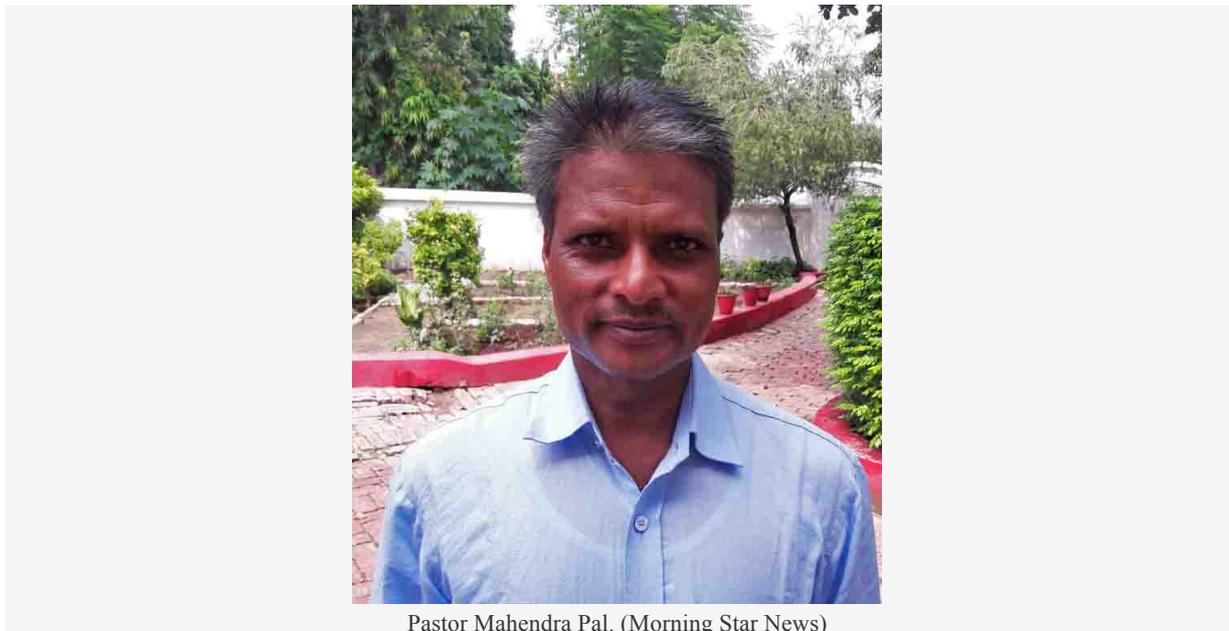
Ultimately, Ambedkar argued that denying the ability to convert is regressive. Moreover, he suggested it is inhuman to forbid someone to change his religion. As he stated,

"'You should live in the same circumstances in which you are living at present' may be worthy advice for the animals, but it can never be for man. The difference between an animal and a man is that the man can make progress, while the animal cannot. No progress can be made without change. Conversion is a sort of change. And if no progress can be made without change, i.e. conversion, obviously conversion becomes essential. The ancestral religion cannot be a hindrance in the path of a progressive man."

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## **Pastors in India put trust in God amid persecution**

***Jailed, beaten church leaders keep their sights upward***



Pastor Mahendra Pal. (Morning Star News)

Morning Star News (16.08.2017) – <http://morningstarnews.org/2017/08/pastors-india-put-trust-god-amid-persecution/> - As two Hindu extremists gripped his hands while others beat him last week in northern India, Pastor Amar Stephen was asking God to forgive them.

"Some attackers were holding both my hands so I couldn't move, while others in the mob beat me," he told Morning Star News. "At that time, I did not feel the pain of a single blow. I was praying to the Lord, 'Lord please forgive them. Please begin your work in the hearts of these people.'"

The hard-line Hindu mob on Thursday (Aug. 10) had gone to his residence in Muzzafarnagar, Uttar Pradesh state, to warn him against returning to Mohanpur village in neighboring Uttarakhand state, where he had preached at a house church two days earlier, he said.

"You can do nothing to us – we will attack you again, if you don't stop Christian activities in Mohanpur," one told him.

At the Aug. 8 service in Mohanpur, in Roorkee District, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) members had stormed into the worship service and beaten him with belts, shoes and sticks.

"They barged inside the house church and questioned, 'What is your business here?'" he said. "I told them we were praying. They said, 'You are not praying, you are converting people.' I said, 'No, no. We are not converting. We are praying to the Lord, we are worshiping Him. Is taking the name of the Lord itself conversion?'"

They seized Bibles and Christian literature and took hold of him, telling him to come with them to the police station. Although he consented, as they were about to leave the room they began beating him, he said.

The mob of about 150 people videotaped their assault as they beat him with belts and kicked him, he said.

"I was dragged to the police station held by the hands by the RSS activists," he said. "They took out a procession to a distance of about half a kilometer with an intent to shame. They shouted, 'Look, look here is the man who follows Jesus Christ. God who could not save Himself, how can He save the world? How can He save you?'"

They continued mocking him, spitting out derogatory, hateful words against Christianity and Christ, he said.

Police took a written statement from him and released him. After coming home from the police station that day beaten and bruised, Pastor Stephen went to his knees in prayer and began reading the Scriptures.

"The Lord spoke to me from Isaiah 64 in the verses 10, 11 and 12," he said. "I am confident that the Lord will establish His church in that very place and among those very people."

A convert from Hinduism, since he began pastoring in the area five years ago he has never faced any opposition, he said. His visit to Mohanpur drew attention to his ministry, as the assailants know some of the church members there.

"I am asked to not enter the village," he said. "But with this incident, my faith grew stronger. I am spending more time in prayer for the believers there. I'm hoping even more strongly that the Lord's house be built there, and the people who attacked me, that they must know Christ. They must experience His love."

He asked for prayer for the Christians in Mohanpur, saying they are living under great pressure.

### ***Waiting on God***

In Uttar Pradesh state, also in northern India, pastor Mahendra Pal, 45, was attacked by Vishwa Hindu Parishad extremists on July 30. Police then arrested him.

Five days earlier he has been arrested on charges of forcible conversion in Nawabganj, Bareilly District. Police soon released him when they found the allegations were baseless, as they did on his re-arrest on July 30.

"Police were under pressure by the RSS and VHP activists in the village," Pastor Pal said.

The assailants, Akhilesh Kumar Gangwar, Amit Kumar, Sathyendra Gangwar, Naresh Gangwar, Sarvesh Gangwar, Guddu Gangwar and Sunil Saini are aides of village President Jamna Prasad Gangwar, who filed the complaint with police, Pastor Pal said.

Kumar made false allegations that the pastor would get him married and pay him 200,000 rupees (US\$3,117), and secure him a house and job if he converted to Christianity, Pastor Pal told Morning Star News. Another VHP member accused the pastor of promising him a gas cylinder.

"I passed the first test of arrest, and when the re-arrest happened, I stood firm in faith that even this time the Lord will come to my refuge," Pastor Pal told Morning Star News. Pastors from other parts of India came and spoke to authorities, and he was released, he said. Calls from organizations in Delhi questioning his re-arrest also helped.

Last week, Hindu extremists warned him not to lead any worship services, he said.

"The Lord spoke to me from Isaiah 41:10 – I am waiting on Him for the doors to open," he told Morning Star News. "Very recently, a Muslim brother also has come into faith. When we gathered to worship as church, it was being filled by at least 150 attendees, on non-Sundays too. Even the rich and the Hindus from upper castes came into light, hearing the gospel. The Lord will lead His sheep, He will not leave them alone. I am waiting for His call, I am ready to go whichever direction Christ points me to."

Since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took power in May 2014, the hostile tone of his National Democratic Alliance government, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), against non-Hindus has emboldened Hindu extremists in several parts of the country to attack Christians, religious rights advocates say.

India ranked 15<sup>th</sup> on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2017 World Watch List of the countries where Christians experience the most persecution.

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## **Modi accused of hypocrisy after BJP bulldozes through India's latest 'anti-conversion law'**

World Wide Monitor (17.08.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2wU79HY> - Church leaders in India have joined the chorus of protest against the BJP-led government, known for espousing a Hindu nationalist agenda, [hurrying through an "anti-conversion law"](#) in the eastern state of Jharkhand.

The Freedom of Religion Bill, which was introduced and passed on the same day (12 August) in the Jharkhand Assembly, seems harmless in name but in reality prevents people from having the freedom to choose to change their religion.

Under the new law, offenders – those deemed to have "forced" another person to change their religion – could face three years' imprisonment and fines of Rs 50,000 (US \$800), or four years' imprisonment and a Rs 100,000 fine if the person converted is a minor, a woman or a member of the less educated classes, such as Dalits.

"This is their style. They don't want any debate. They just do what they want," Cardinal Telesphore Toppo, the Archbishop of Ranchi (Jharkhand's capital), told World Watch Monitor.

"I don't think it is the desire of one man [the Chief Minister]. There is an ideology behind it. Wherever they [the BJP] are in power, they are doing it.

"They are accusing us of illegal conversions of tribals and Dalits. But can they point out one such conversion?"

Cardinal Toppo, himself a tribal, heads the Catholic Church in Jharkhand, where Christians account for less than five per cent of the state's 32 million people.

Jharkhand is the fifth BJP-ruled state since 2002 to pass an "anti-conversion law" – after Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. However, in western Rajasthan state, the bill passed by the State Assembly in 2011 has not yet become an Act, as it has not received federal presidential approval. (In India, bills passed by State Assemblies become 'Acts' only after receiving the president's assent.)

During the hurried discussion on the bill in the Jharkhand Assembly on 12 August, Stephen Marandi, senior legislator of the opposition Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), challenged the need for such a legislation, summing up the concern of the Christians, Muslims and secular parties over legislation that could be misused against minorities, as has been the case in other states.

"The Constitution gives freedom to practise and profess one's religion. There are already penal provisions ... for those indulging in coercive conversion or using allurements. So what is the need for a separate bill?" Marandi asked, demanding that the bill be referred to a select committee.

However, the ruling BJP-led government instead put the bill to vote, which was quickly passed as the BJP enjoys a clear majority in Jharkhand's state legislature.

Shibu Thomas, founder and director of the charity Persecution Relief, told World Watch Monitor that the "hurry" with which the Hindu nationalists passed the legislation proves that "they do not care for minorities".

"The agenda behind the legislation is to polarise people on religious lines and consolidate the [majority] Hindu voters. They want to fool the Hindus to believe that their religion is under threat due to conversions," said Thomas, whose organisation has set up an online [petition](#) to campaign against "anti-conversion laws" in India.

Thomas added that one former member of the Indian Parliament, Bahadur Oraon, who is also a tribal, said he is willing to convert to Christianity if only to protest against the legislation.

Thomas also criticised what he called the BJP's "shocking misuse" of the name of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Two days before the bill was introduced in the Assembly, the Jharkhand government took out a controversial front-page advertisement in some of the major newspapers, in the name of the BJP chief minister Raghubar Das, with a purported quote from Gandhi insinuating that missionaries were engaging in fraudulent conversions by doling out rice ("goodies") to the "gullible" poor.

"Many are even questioning the source of this quote, attributed to Mahatma Gandhi," said Thomas.

The *Scroll* website – one of the leading Indian news portals – in its [post on 16 August](#) described Jharkhand's anti-conversion bill as a "body blow to freedom of religion in India".

"The Bharatiya Janata Party's attempts at policing religious belief will push the country into a dark age," cautioned the article.

Thomas also accused India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, of engaging in "mere rhetoric" when he called on Indians on Independence Day (15 August) to "[shun violence in the name of faith](#)", saying it was "harmful for the social fabric".

Declaring that India is "the land of Gandhi and Buddha, we have to move forward, taking everyone along," Modi said. "We have to successfully carry it forward and that is why in the name of faith, violence cannot be allowed. The poison of communalism can never benefit the country."

But Thomas said: "While Modi's intentions may be sincere, he is just a pawn and a small entity in the larger scope of things... He has used the same hyperbole in earlier addresses. However, India and the world over are beginning to see that his talk does not match his walk.

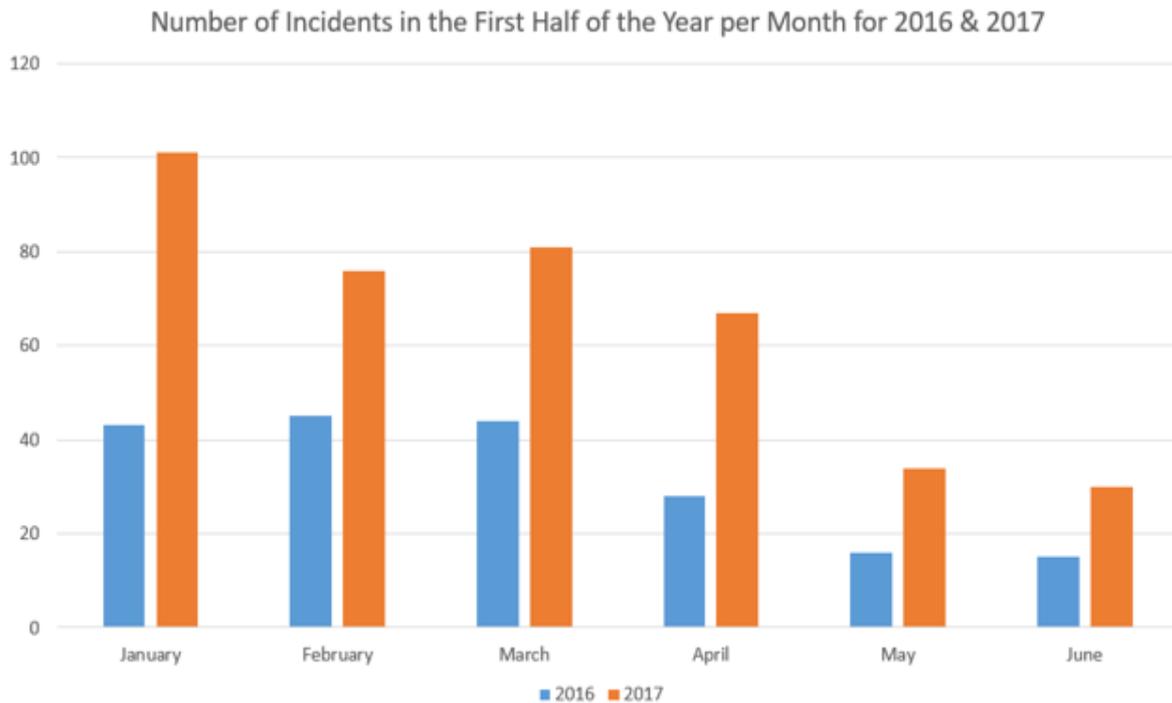
"Every time an incident takes place, instead of his stoic silence, he needs to react and respond and vehemently condemn all atrocities and attacks against minorities in the name of religion. Then people will take him seriously."

Simultaneously, the National Council of Churches in India in an "open letter" to the Prime Minister on Independence Day expressed its anguish that "we keep on hearing statements which stereotype Christians as being aliens or as being people whose patriotism is questioned".

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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.

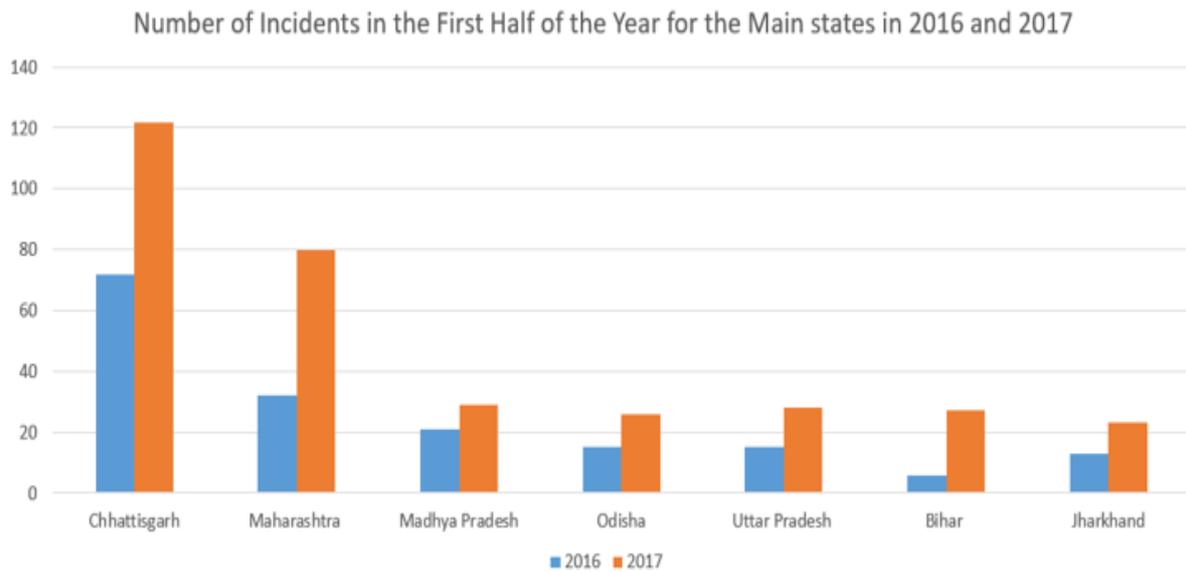
In 32 of them, Christians would have died if timely medical-aid had not been provided.

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>

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## **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/2toQiPv> - 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, allurements 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?"

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## **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/2iffctcl> - 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 Adeb, 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 led 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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