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## **Indian state's "Love Jihad" law denounced by ex-bureaucrats, diplomats in open letter**

By Saurabh Sharma

Reuters (30.12.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3bjzuOh> - Over 100 retired senior civil servants and diplomats urged the Hindu nationalist leader of Uttar Pradesh state to repeal a new law criminalising forced religious conversion of brides, warning in an open letter that it risked fuelling communal tensions.

Although no religion is specified in the legislation, critics say it is aimed against the country's Muslim minority. Hardline Hindu groups have accused Muslim men of waging a campaign, dubbed "Love Jihad", to lure Hindu women to Islam with promises of marriage.

Uttar Pradesh (UP), a northern state that is controlled by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party and is the most populous in the country, enacted a law last month against pressuring brides to change their faith or offering financial rewards to converts.

The BJP-controlled government in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh is preparing to follow suit.

"You can pose no greater threat to the nation than by turning its own citizens against one another, a conflict that can only serve the country's enemies," the former bureaucrats wrote in the letter addressed to Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, a firebrand Hindu monk and rising star in the BJP.

Vigilantes from Hindu groups were intimidating and harassing Indians, especially Muslim men, and "acting as a power unto themselves," the former bureaucrats from various federal ministries, states, government agencies and foreign missions said.

"What is worse is that your law enforcement machinery, with the active backing of your government, is playing a role reminiscent of the secret police in authoritarian regimes," they said in the letter dated Dec. 29.

Thirty Muslim men were arrested in Uttar Pradesh under the new law earlier this month, and could face jail terms if found guilty.

The former bureaucrats, several of whom were well-known public figures, said the state government should withdraw the "illegal" order, compensate victims and hold errant policemen accountable.

Mrityunjay Kumar, an advisor to Adityanath told Reuters that the government has not received any letter yet and called it "a publicity stunt."

"It's an open letter and, therefore, it's been placed in the public domain," said Wajahat Habibullah, India's former chief information commissioner and one of the signatories.

"The main purpose is to awaken the public to the illegality of the action taken by the UP government," he said.

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## **Madhya Pradesh Cabinet gives nod to ordinance on Freedom to Religion Bill**

***Claiming to curb religious conversions using misrepresentation, allurements, force, threat, undue influence, coercion, marriage or any other "fraudulent means", the MP Bill stipulates jail terms of one to five years, with a fine of Rs 25,000, in such cases.***

By Iram Siddique

The Indian Express (29.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3nkGjla> - The Madhya Pradesh government Tuesday approved the Freedom to Religion Bill 2020 as an ordinance in a special cabinet session, after which it was sent to the Governor for her nod.

The state government has taken the ordinance route much like the Uttar Pradesh government to clear its stringent law prohibiting forced religious conversion under its Freedom to Religion Bill 2020. This comes after the three-day session of the assembly was cancelled owing to high cases of COVID-19 being reported.

The three-day assembly session was cancelled by a joint committee of all leaders on Sunday night after about 60 people including officials, employees and five MLAs had tested positive for COVID-19.

Claiming to curb religious conversions using misrepresentation, allurement, force, threat, undue influence, coercion, marriage or any other "fraudulent means", the MP Bill stipulates jail terms of one to five years, with a fine of Rs 25,000, in such cases. The penalty in case of a person using "misrepresentation" or "impersonation" for religious conversion will be higher, including a jail term of 3-10 years and a fine of Rs 50,000.

In contrast, the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Ordinance, 2020, passed last month, says religious conversion using any of the above means, including misrepresentation and impersonation, would entail a jail term of one to five years and a fine of Rs 15,000.

In a significant departure from the UP ordinance though on registration of FIRs in such cases, the MP Bill says these can be dealt with only by police personnel not less than the rank of a sub-inspector, and that solely parents and siblings of the affected individual can file a complaint directly. In case a guardian or a custodian wants to register an offence, they must approach a Sessions Court authorised to deal in these matters and get a court order.

The other big departure between the MP Bill and UP law is the provision for maintenance to women and rights to the property to children in the marriage under question in the legislation planned by the Shivraj Singh Chouhan government. The matter of maintenance will be dealt with as per Section 125 of the CrPC.

In both states, marriages proved to have been undertaken for the sole purpose of a religious conversion or conducted without appropriate notice to the district administration can be declared null and void by family courts.

Return to one's original religion — as in the religion one is born into or that practiced by one's father — will not be counted as a conversion.

While both UP law and MP Bill envisage a jail term of two to ten years in case a person being converted is a minor, or belongs to the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, the MP legislation talks of a penalty of Rs 50,000 against Rs 25,000 in UP.

Both the legislations talk of three to five years of prison terms for religious organisations or individuals seen as carrying out mass conversions, but again the penalty in MP is higher (Rs 1 lakh) than UP (Rs 50,000).

In both states, organisations or priests carrying out conversions have to inform the district administration about 60 days before the date of conversion, failing which the organisation can have its registration cancelled and the priest or facilitator face a jail term. But the MP Bill stipulates a higher penalty again (of Rs 50,000, and 3-5 years' jail term) in such cases, compared to one year extended up to five years and Rs 25,000 in UP.

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## **India's minorities 'face increasing intolerance'**

By Bijay Kumar Minj

Union of catholic Asian news (17.12.20) - <https://cutt.ly/DhMTGOK>

India has become increasingly intolerant towards religious minorities, especially the Muslim community, according to a new report.

The South Asia State of Minorities Report 2020 noted that the general public has come under attack from federal and state governments for criticizing the administration and institutions.

The report looks at the status of access to personal liberties, especially among minorities, in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

"It is true that we minorities are facing the onslaught of the Narendra Modi government very systematically. As a matter of fact, they have started framing laws that are against the spirit of secularism, democracy and the republic," A.C. Michael, national coordinator of the United Christian Forum, told UCA News.

"Have you ever heard of a case anywhere in the world where two adults are stopped from getting married by the police? This is what is happening in Uttar Pradesh these days. The Uttar Pradesh police have filed almost two dozen first instance reports against interfaith marriages specifically targeting Muslims.

"Spreading hatred against minorities has become like a fashion for ruling party politicians to remain in power and acquire more. If they continue to succeed in tricking ordinary citizens and win elections, this trend of violence against minorities is going to continue."

According to the report, "hate crimes against minorities have seen a spike — taking the form of mob lynching and vigilante violence against Muslims, Christians, and Dalits."

The report said the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has "unveiled a new and now frontal attack on religious minorities. The persecution towards minorities had a chilling effect on civic space for Muslims and their organizations."

The BJP has strengthened and expanded a series of discriminatory laws and measures that target religious minorities that include anti-conversion laws, social exclusion and violence against Christians, Muslims and other religious minorities.

The report also said that "laws ostensibly meant for the protection of cows continue to provide institutional backing for similar campaigns against Muslims and Dalits."

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## 'Love jihad': What a reported miscarriage says about India's anti-conversion law

By Geeta Pandey

BBC news (17.12.20) - <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55314832>

Reports that a pregnant Hindu woman who was forcibly separated from her Muslim husband and may then have miscarried have highlighted controversies over a new anti-conversion law in India.

Earlier this month, a video clip went viral in India.

It showed a group of men, with orange scarves draped around their necks, heckling a woman in Moradabad town in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"It's because of people like you that this law had to be enacted," one of the men scolds her.

The hecklers were from Bajrang Dal, a hardline Hindu group which supports Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The law they are talking about is the **Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance** that the state recently brought in to target "love jihad" - an Islamophobic term radical Hindu groups use to imply that Muslim men prey on Hindu women to convert them to Islam through marriage.

The incident in the video took place on 5 December. The Bajrang Dal activists handed over the 22-year-old woman, her husband and his brother to the police, who then sent her to a government shelter and arrested the men.

Days later, the woman, who was seven weeks pregnant, alleged she suffered a miscarriage while in custody.

Earlier this week, a court allowed her to return to her husband's home after she told the magistrate that she was an adult and had married the Muslim man by choice. Her husband and brother-in-law remain in jail.

In media interviews since being released on Monday evening, she has accused the staff at the shelter of mistreating her and said that her initial complaints of stomach pain were ignored. The shelter has denied the allegations.

image captionThe 22-year-old woman was taken to hospital after she complained of pain in the abdomen

"When my condition deteriorated, they took me to a hospital [on 11 December]. After a blood test, I was admitted and they gave me injections, after which I started bleeding."

Two days later, she said, she was given more injections. The bleeding increased and her health worsened, leading to the loss of her baby, she says.

Whether that is true and what exactly happened in the hospital is still unclear.

On Monday morning, while she was still in detention, the **authorities rubbished reports that she had miscarried**. The reports were based on interviews with her mother-in-law.

The chairperson of the Child Protection Commission, Vishesh Gupta, denied all reports of the miscarriage and went as far as to insist that "the baby is safe".

A gynaecologist at the hospital where she was treated told reporters that "the seven-week-old foetus could be seen in the ultrasound". However, the doctor added only "a trans-vaginal test could confirm whether the baby was safe or not".

But the authorities have not yet commented on the allegations she has made since her release. They have also not given her the results of her ultrasound examinations or details of which medicines she was injected with.

So, five days after she was first taken to hospital, there's still no clarity on the status of the baby, raising questions and doubts.

But reports that the young woman may have had a miscarriage have caused outrage in India, with many taking to social media to blame the authorities for it.

In India, interfaith marriages have long attracted censure, with families often opposing such unions.

But the new law, which stipulates that anyone wishing to convert must seek approval from the district authorities, gives the state a direct power over the citizens' right to love and choose a spouse.

It carries a jail term of up to 10 years and offences under it are non-bailable. At least four other BJP-governed states are drafting similar laws against "love jihad".

Critics have called the law regressive and offensive and said it would be used as a tool to target interfaith couples, especially liaisons between Hindu women and Muslim men.

A petition has also been filed in the Supreme Court, demanding that it be scrapped.

image captionA march against "love jihad" in the western city of Ahmedabad in 2018

In the short time since it was passed on 29 November, at least half a dozen cases have been reported under the controversial law.

Weddings of interfaith couples, between consenting adults and even those involving parental approval, have been halted and Muslim grooms have been arrested.

The 22-year-old woman says she had converted to Islam and married her Muslim husband in July in Dehradun, a city in the neighbouring state of Uttarakhand. They were intercepted when they came to Moradabad to register their wedding.

"The biggest problem with a law like this is that it treats interfaith love as a criminal activity," says historian Charu Gupta.

"It also refuses to believe that a woman has agency, it disregards her free will. Isn't it a woman's choice who she wants to marry? And even if she wants to convert to another religion, what is the problem?"

"This law," she says, "is so wide in its range and scope, and it puts the onus on those charged under it to prove their innocence. And that is very dangerous."

## **Muslims targeted under Indian state's 'love jihad' law**

### ***Hindu rightwing conspiracy theory prompts crackdown on interfaith marriages in Uttar Pradesh.***

By Hannah Ellis-Petersen

The Guardian (14.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/34gdHmr> - Police in India have rounded up Muslim men and disrupted interfaith marriage ceremonies under new laws prohibiting so-called "love jihad".

In the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, police have begun cracking down on marriages between Muslims and Hindus and have arrested at least 10 Muslim men under a law that prohibits forced religious conversions.

"Love jihad" is a Hindu rightwing conspiracy theory claiming that Muslim men lure Hindu women into marriage in order to force their conversion to Islam. Though the central government admitted in February it had no official records of any incidents of the practice, the theory has gained so much traction in India under the right wing ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) that it has been used to justify legislation enacted in Uttar Pradesh. It is now proposed in four other BJP-controlled Indian states.

This week a marriage between two Muslims was stopped by police in Kushinagar, Uttar Pradesh, after a tipoff by a Hindu rightwing group. The police stormed the ceremony and arrested Haider Ali, 39, who was kept in custody overnight and alleged that the police tortured him for hours using a leather belt. It was only after the family produced evidence that his bride was Muslim by birth that they released Ali.

The Uttar Pradesh crackdown has fuelled fears that the "love jihad" law is being used to target Muslims and outlaw consensual interfaith marriage in Uttar Pradesh. No Hindus have been arrested under the new law.

A day after the law was enacted in early December, police in the city of Lucknow violently halted a wedding ceremony between a Hindu woman, Raina Gupta, and a Muslim man, Mohammad Asif, that was to include both Hindu and Muslim rituals. The families, who supported the union, said neither was going to convert religion, but the wedding was still prevented from going ahead.

In another case, a Muslim man, Owais Ahmad, was arrested last week and sentenced to 14 days judicial custody for allegedly trying to pressure a Hindu woman into converting to Islam and eloping in 2019, following a case filed by her father. The woman is now married to a Hindu man, and Ahmad said he had "no link with the woman".

A 27-year-old Muslim man, Rashid, and his brother were arrested last week in Moradabad. They had been attempting to register Rashid's marriage to a 22-year-old Hindu woman, Muskan Jahan, who had converted to Islam prior to the wedding. As the trio visited a lawyer, they were surrounded by members of a rightwing Hindu group, Bajrang Dal, who accosted them and brought them to the police station.

Rashid remains in jail in Uttar Pradesh on charges of forcible conversion of his wife, while Jahan was taken to a shelter by the police. Addressing the Bajrang Dal members as they surrounded her, Jahan denied any coercion. "I am an adult, I am 22 years old. I got married of my own free will," she said.

## **UN Rights Experts send 2nd letter to India voicing concern over persecution of Muslims**

By Sumaira FH

APP, UrduPoint/Pakistan Point News (10.12.2020) - <https://bit.ly/383Kso5> - A group of prominent UN human rights experts have reiterated their concerns over the Hindu-nationalist Indian government's hate speech, violent attacks and harassment of peaceful anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protestors, as also the disproportionate targeting of India's Muslim minority, particularly in Northeast Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, earlier this year.

In a second joint letter -- based on reports and testimonies -- sent to India, the experts, numbering seven, extensively documented events surrounding the Delhi pogrom, suggesting that hate speech by several leaders of the BJP ruling party triggered violent attacks against Muslims and their places of worship as well as properties in February.

They also highlighted that the government pre-mediated these attacks by preplanned mobilization of Hindu nationalist mobs from other states, with supply of arms and ammunitions.

The UN experts expressed disquiet at the "lack of accountability" and a "persistent climate of impunity", "despite flagrant incitement to violence against Muslims through advocacy of hatred expressed by high-profile political figures and members of Parliament".

They lamented police's complicity in violence by Hindu mobs against Muslim population in Delhi and UP, as well as interference of the Indian Government in independence of the judiciary by transferring a presiding judge of a case related to the Delhi pogrom.

The joint letter was sent to India by these UN experts, also known as UN Special Procedures or Rapporteurs, on Oct.

9, 2020. It was made public Wednesday after India did not respond within the given deadline of 60 days.

The first letter was dispatched to India on Feb. 28, 2020, in which nine human rights experts expressed serious concerns over use of excessive force against, intimidation and harassment of anti-CAA protestors, in particular those belonging to Muslim minority. The protest erupted on December 15, 2019, and continued for 55 days.

The new letter comes against the backdrop of growing evidence about Indian State complicity in the Delhi pogrom and other reported acts of violence and hostility against Muslims in the country under the BJP-led Government. Earlier this year, reputed NGOs Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have also published detailed reports, sharing evidence of Indian State's connivance in targeted violence against Muslims in Delhi.

The signatories of the letter include Ahmed Shaheed, Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief; Elina Steinerte, Vice-Chairman of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; Ms. Agnes Callamard, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions; Ms. Irena Khan, Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression; Clement Nyaletsossi Voule, Special Rapporteur on peaceful assembly and of association; Fernand de Vareennes, Special Rapporteur on minority issues and Mr. Nils Melzer, Special Rapporteur on torture.

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## The illegality of Uttar Pradesh's crackdown on interfaith marriages

*There is a robust legal framework which guarantees an individual the freedom to worship a God of his or her own choice and marry based on love*

KTS Tulsı and Tanessa Puri



*The so-called love (ANI)*

Hindustan Times (08.12.2020) - With Uttar Pradesh leading the way, a set of states now plan to pass laws to end what they call "love *jihad*", a term which lacks any real definition and is beyond comprehension. This will make it a non-bailable, cognisable offence. Apart from the fact that it has no basis in law, the practical implication of this is that the constable on the street will have the power to arrest someone considered guilty of this "crime" without seeking the court's permission. This proposed law is wrong on many counts.

First, the Constitution enshrines secularism. This means India is not anti-religion, pro-religion or irreligious. Despite this, several states have had anti-conversion laws for a long time, including Odisha, Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand. However, these laws made it illegal to use force to convert a person. The so-called love *jihad* law plans to outlaw religious conversion which may take place for marriage purposes. This interferes with personal liberty.

Second, based on Articles 25 to 28, an Indian citizen is guaranteed the freedom to practise any religion of his or her choice. The "love *jihad*" law curtails this freedom. The State wants to intervene not only in the citizens' private relationship with God, but also in the choice of their spouse. In addition, the proposed law does not account for agnostics.

Third, the Supreme Court in *Shafin Jahan v Ashok KM* (2018), after setting aside the annulment of the marriage of a Muslim convert from Kerala, Hadiya (Akhila Ashokan) and

Shafin Jahan, a Muslim man, upheld the right to marry a person of one's choice as a part of Article 21.

The Court said, "Matters of dress and of food, of ideas and ideologies, of love and partnership, are within the central aspects of identity. The law may regulate (subject to constitutional compliance) the conditions of a valid marriage, as it may regulate the situations in which a marital tie can be ended or annulled...Matters of belief and faith, including whether to believe, are at the core of constitutional liberty. The Constitution exists for believers as well as for agnostics. The Constitution protects the ability of each individual to pursue a way of life or faith to which she or he seeks to adhere...The right to marry a person of one's choice is integral to Article 21 of the Constitution. The Constitution also guarantees the right to life. This right cannot be taken away, except through a law which is substantively and procedurally fair, just and reasonable. Intrinsic to the liberty which the Constitution guarantees as a fundamental right is the ability of each individual to make decisions on matters central to the pursuit of happiness." Therefore, the proposed law violates the right to life under Article 21.

Fourth, in SC's K.S. Puttaswamy v UOI (2017) judgment, it read the "right of choice of a family life" as a fundamental right. The regressive law limits the choice of a prospective spouse such that this spouse would only be one approved by the State.

Fifth, the Allahabad High Court, on November 11, in the case of Salamat Ansari v Uttar Pradesh (2020), held that the choice of a partner is the exclusive domain of the individual. It also distinguished itself from the Noor Jahan Begum case (2014) by suggesting that this earlier case did not deal with the "liberty of two matured individuals in choosing a partner or their right to freedom of choice as to with whom they would like to live".

There is a robust legal framework which guarantees an individual the freedom to worship a God of his or her own choice and marry based on love.

UP's move is illegal for it will deny a citizen his or her choice in a deeply personal domain which is protected by the Constitution.

***KTS Tulsi is a senior advocate and Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha and Tanessa Puri is associate at the Chambers of KTS Tulsi  
The views expressed are personal***

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## **Police in Uttar Pradesh arrest 10 men under new anti-conversion law**

By Saurabh Sharma

Reuters (07.12.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3a1mxYL> - Police in northern India have arrested 10 men for allegedly compelling women to change their religion after getting married, using a new anti-conversion law popularly called the "Love Jihad" law, officials said on Monday.

Last month, Uttar Pradesh state became the first Indian province to pass a law against forced or fraudulent religious conversions, laying out prison terms for anyone compelling others to convert their faith or luring them into these conversions through marriage.

The anti-conversion law does not name any religion but critics call it Islamophobic for being solely imposed with the objective of preventing "Love Jihad", which hardline Hindu groups describe as a conspiracy to convert gullible Hindu women to Islam by misleading them with promises of love and marriage.

Officials in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state, said the law will help prevent fraudulent religious conversions and was designed to protect young women.

The federal government and the Uttar Pradesh government are both controlled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

Four senior police officials said 10 men were arrested last week from different parts of Uttar Pradesh based on separate criminal complaints lodged by parents who alleged their daughters were abducted by Muslim men.

"We are using the new law to only arrest those men where we have proof to show it is a clear case of forced religious conversion," said one police official, speaking on conditions of anonymity as he was not authorised to brief the press.

Under the new law, a man and woman belonging to different religions will have to give two months' notice to the district magistrate before they get married and they will be given permission if there are no objections.

At least four other Indian states - Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Karnataka and Assam have said that they are planning to bring in similar anti-conversion laws.

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## **Defending persecuted Christians in India at the UN**

ECLJ (18.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3fFkSJI> - In our continued work to speak out on behalf of the persecuted Christians in India, we filed a written submission to the U.N. Human Rights Council (UNHRC) urging action.

Christians in India are facing targeted harassment and violent persecution. The ACLJ, our American affiliate, recounted this summer a story of Christians who were attacked by a mob, and then to add insult to injury, instead of receiving help from the police, they were told they could either leave the village or convert to Hinduism.

The fact that a U.N. member state would allow such an ultimatum to be put on its own people is outrageous. Now, we have made the UNHRC aware of this travesty.

As we stated in our report:

In July 2020, Hindu village leaders in the Latehar District met to determine what should be done to Christian villagers who refused to renounce their faith. At this meeting, the leaders determined that if Christians refused to renounce their faith and convert to Hinduism, they would be forced out of the villages. When six Christian families in the village did just that, they were brutally attacked and beaten by a radical mob of Hindus. After this attack, instead of protecting and assisting the families, the police also ordered the six Christian families to either renounce their faith or flee the town, giving them one month to comply. Joginder Bhuya, one of the victims, described the attack saying: "They tied our hands and legs with rope . . . . All the men's hands and legs were tied with the rope. That

way they might have thought we cannot defend ourselves. They also misbehaved with our women and kicked them all over their body. They punched us on our faces and back. It was a very pathetic and helpless situation for us”.

Sadly, these stories of persecution are becoming all too common within India. According to one report by Evangelical Fellowship of India, there have already been 135 cases of persecution against Christians within India during the first six months of 2020. We detailed some of these instances to the U.N.:

For example, on 21 June 2020, Christian Pastor Rao was attacked while praying for a sick person in Kolonguda village. Around 9:30 am, Pastor Rao arrived at the sick person’s house to pray with them. Shortly thereafter, a mob of 150 individuals surrounded the house claiming that “India is a Hindu nation, and there is no place for Christians”. The mob then proceeded to break into the house and drag the Pastor into the streets where they beat him. Pastor Rao, who survived the attack, described the incident:

“They dragged me into the street and pushed me to the ground. There, they started to trample on me. They tore my clothes, kicked me all over my body, and punched my left eye. I have sustained a serious eye injury as a result of a blood clot”.

It is critical that the UNHRC work with the government of India to ensure that Christians are protected and don’t have to live with the fear that they may be attacked simply because of their religion.

It is imperative that the U.N take swift action by calling on the government of India to ensure that the targeting of Christians in India is stopped. Government action must be taken to ensure that all of India’s citizens are allowed to peacefully live out their religious beliefs without fear of civil or government action against them. No one should have to live under the fear of being abused, targeted, or even killed simply because of their faith.

Shortly after filing this written submission at the U.N., we also presented an oral intervention at the UNHRC in Geneva, Switzerland, detailing about the plight of these persecuted Christians in India by stating: <https://youtu.be/1OG5myzolo8>.

Sign our petition and stand with us as we continue to give a voice to the voiceless and protect India’s persecuted Christians.

[Read the full text of the petition.](#)

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## **Elderly priest’s arrest stirs unprecedented protests in India**

***Father Stanilaus Lourduswamy, along with 15 others, allegedly conspired with Maoist rebels to destabilize the federal government in what critics have called ‘absurd.’***

By Anto Akkara

National Catholic Register (03.11.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UbhZG8> - Few arrests in Indian history have evoked such widespread protests as that of Jesuit Father Stanislaus Lourduswamy on Oct. 8. Better known as Father Stan Swamy, this 83-year-old is a renowned crusader for the exploited and impoverished indigenous people of eastern Jharkhand state.

Three weeks after the arrest of Father Stan, under India's terrorism law, outrage and protests continue unabated in parishes and cities across India with nuns, priests and bishops taking to the streets in both metropolitan and remote regions of the country, even as international solidarity for the detained priest grows.

Officers of the National Investigation Agency (NIA) bundled off the octogenarian priest from his residence on the night of Oct. 8, stunning fellow Jesuits at the Jesuit social action center in Ranchi, capital of Jharkhand state. The NIA flew Father Swamy next morning to Mumbai on the west coast.

Father Swamy is the last of the 16 arrested in what is being called the Bhima Koregaon "conspiracy," which has been dubbed "flimsy" and "absurd" by defense lawyers and other critics. These 16 individuals, which include activists, lawyers and writers, are alleged to have conspired with Maoist rebels to destabilize the federal government. The arrests began in July 2018 and all of them have been charged under the "Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act," which denies bail to the accused.

India's government is already under fire by international observers for their human rights record. Most recently, Michelle Bachelet, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, appealed to the Indian government to safeguard the rights of human rights defenders and NGO members, and their ability to carry out their work on behalf of the groups they represent.

"I urge the Government to ensure that no one else is detained for exercising their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly — and to do its utmost, in law and policy, to protect India's robust civil society," the High Commissioner said in a statement on Oct 20.

### ***Catholic leaders respond***

A stinging condemnation of Father Lourduwamy's arrest came on Oct 26 from Cardinal Charles Bo of Yangon, the president of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC).

"It is with great shock and agony the FABC heard of the arrest of the 83-year-old Jesuit priest and his incarceration and we are surprised at the charges brought against him," Cardinal Bo said.

"The arrest and cold-hearted incarceration of Father Swamy reminds us of the treatment meted out to Mahatma Gandhi when he stood up for the rights of the Indian people," the FABC president said in his appeal.

Within hours of Father Lourduwamy's arrest, the Jesuit Conference of South Asia (JCSA), the largest Jesuit conference in the world with more than 4,000 members, deplored the action.

Following Father Lourduwamy's arrest, the Social Justice and Ecology Secretariat of the Jesuits worldwide issued a statement on Oct 9: "We...strongly condemn the arrest of Father Stan Swamy, demand immediate release and refrain from arbitrary arrests of innocent law abiding citizens."

In solidarity with the priest, the SJEC ha also launched a petition demanding that the government quash the "false charges and release Jesuit Fr. Stan Swamy."

### ***Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy***

A small village in Maharashtra state with Mumbai as its capital, Bhima-Koregaon is associated with a historic battle when on Jan. 1, 1818, dalits (low castes treated as social outcasts) dominated in the British Army that had earlier defeated the army of a local Hindu king.

At the Victory Pillar, installed by the British East India Company in memory of those who had fought for the company in the battle, thousands of dalits come to pay respect every New Year day.

The 200th anniversary in 2018 resulted in a larger than usual gathering that converged at Bhima-Koregaon. During the celebrations, there were clashes between dalit and maratha (another caste) groups, resulting in the death of at least one person and injuries to several others.

During the investigation of this violence, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government of Maharashtra claimed to have stumbled on a nation-wide "Urban Naxal conspiracy" by members of the Maoist party, Naxal, against the BJP government, which filed the conspiracy case that was taken over by the NIA in early 2020.

Two days before his arrest, Father Stan elaborated in a video the attempts by the investigators to implicate him in the conspiracy, accusing him of possessing "incriminating documents" to link him to Maoist groups and the Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy. While reiterating that he has "never visited" Bhima-Koregaon, Father Swamy said he had been twice raided and had been subjected to more than 15 hours of interrogations since the conspiracy case was filed in 2018.

### ***A simple question***

Earlier in 2018, Father Swamy had summarized his advocacy work for the deprived adivasis (indigenous people) who have been steadily marginalized in Jharkhand by the mining and industrial lobby, in an article in The Wire, India's leading news portal. In the article, Father Swamy asked, "Does raising questions on the rights of Adivasis make me a 'Deshdrohi (anti-national)'?" when he was linked to the Bhima-Koregaon conspiracy.

In fact, the sedition case against the Jesuit missionary was filed when Jharkhand was under BJP rule in 2018. Father Swamy had a foretaste of the trouble to come in October 2019 when the Jharkhand police — under BJP rule at the time — raided his residence. The police confiscated his spartan possessions — a wooden chair, table and cabinet on orders of the court, citing the priest's to appear in court regarding a case of social protest.

"The central (federal) government is silencing those who stand up for the rights of adivasis. Father Stan was a voice for the adivasis and their rights. There is a hidden agenda behind this," declared Chief Minister Soren, addressing the video press conference, organized by the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) on Oct. 21, which included a dozen eminent speakers from across the country.

Such an unequivocal rebuttal of a sedition charge by a chief minister exposed the political fault-lines behind the arrest of the 16 that includes Father Swamy.

### ***Voices of protest***

Leaders of half a dozen opposition parties who addressed the People's Union for Civil Liberties' conference were unanimous in their belief that Father Swamy's arrest was politically motivated, all on a "flimsy charge," said Mihir Desai, a senior lawyer who is defending those of his colleagues charged with sedition.

In their own statement, the PUCL noted, "Father Stan's meticulous documentation of the untold suffering experienced by adivasi youth, hundreds of whom were imprisoned for no offence at all, earned the ire of the police and the state which launched a witch hunt against Father Stan and some others in the human rights movement in Jharkhand."

Sanbor Shullai, BJP legislator of eastern Meghalaya state, surprisingly joined the chorus of protest, writing an Oct. 13 letter to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, demanding the release of the Jesuit.

"The arrest of Father Stan Swamy, who has dedicated his life with a mission to uplift the tribals of Jharkhand, has triggered insecurity among the minority Christian community not only across the state but throughout the country," said Shullai. He described the arrest as "highly questionable and condemnable."

Likewise, eminent author and historian Ramachandra Guha promptly decried the arrest of Father Swamy who has spent a "lifetime fighting for the rights of adivasis."

"That is why the Modi regime seeks to suppress and silence them; because for this regime, the profits of mining companies take precedence over the lives and livelihoods of adivasis," Mr Guha tweeted.

### ***Bail denied***

Despite all the protests and the daily headlines, on Oct. 22, the NIA court denied bail on health grounds to the 83-year old priest suffering from Parkinson's disease.

"We were stunned by Father Stan's arrest. We are a bit relieved that the protest is catching up. But the question is when is he going to be released? That is what worries us," said Auxiliary Bishop Theodore Mascarenhas of Ranchi and CBCI secretary general during 2016-2019, in an Oct. 29 interview with the Register.

With Father Swamy's arrest, Bishop Mascarenhas pointed out that "our constitutional right to speak up for the poor and marginalized is being denied."

"The people here are worried and agitated," added Bishop Mascarenhas, who had joined a public protest in front of the St Mary's Cathedral in Ranchi along with Archbishop Felix Toppo in solidarity with thousands protesting in the streets.

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## **Hindu extremists terrorise small Pentecostal community in Uttar Pradesh**

***Members of the Yuva Shakti Sangathan accuse a Christian clergyman of trying to convert hundreds of Hindus. Rev Santosh Kannaujia denies the allegations. Local Christians gather only to pray. For the Global Council of Indian Christians, Hindu radicals think Indian Christians are second-class citizens.***

By Nirmala Carvalho

Asia News (15.09.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2RwfI79> - Hindu extremists from the Yuva Shakti Sangathan attacked a small Pentecostal community in Bela, a village in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, terrorising its members last Sunday.

Speaking to AsiaNews, Sajan K. George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), said that a dozen of Hindu extremists, associated with Hindutva, a pan-Hindu extremist ideology, went to the home of Santosh Kannaujia, a local Pentecostal clergyman.

The extremists accused him of trying to convert Hindus to Christianity in the nearby village of Cholapur. Santosh was defended by members of his community; the police intervened to stop the row, making arrests on both sides.

According to Praveen Dubey, head of Yuva Shakti Sangathan, Santosh attempted to convert hundreds of people; the pastor denied the allegations saying that local Christians only gather to pray.

The GCIC firmly condemned the action of the radical Hindu group, which caused clashes by disseminating false information.

George slammed extremist groups that operate in the Bela area and harass Pentecostals.

"Conversion," the GCIC president said, "is not illegal. It is a constitutional right, like praying. Worshipping is not a crime, yet these right-wing groups, on the basis of mere rumour or fake information, bother and terrorise the small Christian community."

George notes that India is a secular country, and that all its citizens are equal before the law. "However, some people think that Pentecostal Christians do not have the same rights as Hindus, and that people who belong to minorities are second-class citizens."

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## **Living on the edge, Pakistani Hindus still feel safer in India**

By Anushree Fadnavis

Reuters (17.06.2020) - <https://reut.rs/37RVNXz> - Seven years ago, Dharamveer Solanki, a Hindu, left his home in Pakistan's Hyderabad city, never to return. When his train crossed the border into India, Solanki said he felt happier than ever before.

"It felt as though I had been reborn," he said, sitting inside a bustling refugee colony on the outskirts of New Delhi, where he and hundreds of other Hindus who fled Muslim-majority Pakistan have built a new home.

(Click on [reut.rs/3ddjECt](https://reut.rs/3ddjECt) to see a picture package on Hindu refugees from Pakistan in Delhi)

Asylum-seekers like Solanki are the main beneficiaries of a law that Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist government introduced late last year, laying out a path to citizenship for people from six religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan who arrived in India before 2015.

The law excluded Muslims from the list, and that determination of rights to citizenship based on religion triggered protests across India that resulted in a fierce police crackdown and deadly violence. Critics say the law discriminates against Muslims and undermines India's secular constitution.

But for the Hindus of Pakistan, Modi's long-held commitment to providing them refuge has drawn more and more across the border even before the new law was enacted.

In the 15 months through March 2019 India's home ministry dealt with 16,121 applications from Pakistani nationals for long-term visas. In preceding years, the number of visas granted rose from hundreds to thousands.

The flow of migrants has stopped temporarily as borders have been sealed to control the spread of the coronavirus.

But many remain desperate to cross, Solanki said. They often come on 25-day pilgrimage visas and stay on until they get citizenship.

Solanki is still waiting for India to grant him citizenship, as the process has now been delayed by the coronavirus outbreak in the country. He was unaware that there was a World Refugee Day, but when told by Reuters that it would fall on June 20, he was very clear what he would like to see.

"The citizenship law has been passed. Our people should now get land and benefits as citizens," Solanki told Reuters at his home in the Majnu Ka Tilla neighbourhood on Delhi's northern fringe.

The settlement where he lives is a cluster of cement, brick and wood huts, with no electricity or water supply, off a busy road. Around 600 people live there. Many of the young men work as hawkers or, like Solanki, as labourers.

Several said they lived in better conditions in Pakistan, but they felt safer in India.  
Slideshow (29 Images)

A few miles away, across the heavily-polluted Yamuna river, a newer settlement has sprung up in the woods beneath a highway overpass called Signature Bridge.

In July last year, when Reuters began observing this community, there were only a few rickety huts. But now hundreds of people live there.

The huts are built with wood from the surrounding forest. There is no electricity or water supply, and families cook on wood-fired stoves.

"At least here our daughters are safe and we can freely practice our religion," said Nirma Bagri, a 35-year-old woman.

Here, in a country they have mostly known through stories passed down by parents or grand-parents who lived in pre-Partition India, or through Bollywood films, the refugees are slowly trying to assimilate.

A young couple at the settlement was so elated with the law passed in December that they named their daughter born that month "Nagarikta," the Hindi word for "citizenship."

Charitable Hindus often offer donations of food, clothes, solar lamps, and other household items.

During a visit to the settlement in the woods in February, Reuters journalists encountered members of the right-wing Hindu group Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), who said they were organising education classes for the children.

The group has ties to Modi's ruling BJP, have been blamed for violent attacks on minority Muslims, and have a stated aim of turning India into a Hindu supremacist nation.

While confirming they belonged to the VHP, the men declined to give their names. Refugees told Reuters later that the VHP men had told them not to speak to the media.

"We are trying to build a life here," said Solanki. "These people are just helping us."

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## **Christian man murdered on account of his faith**

CSW (16.06.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3hSbeUe> - Kande Mudu (Philip), a 27-year-old man who converted to Christianity four years ago, was murdered in Bari village, Khunti District, Jharkhand on 7 June. His family was the only Christian family in their village and faced local opposition and threats to their lives, including a violent attack on their home in 2018.

Mrs Bindu Mudu and the couple's two daughters, who are one and three years old, were forced to flee for their lives after the murder.

The attack took place at approximately 8pm on 7 June. Mr and Mrs Mudu had finished dinner and gathered for family prayer when they heard banging on their front door. A group of six to eight men armed with sharp weapons and homemade pistols demanded that Mr Mudu come outside. The men later broke down the door and dragged him outside as Mrs Mudu pleaded for her husband's life. Once they had got Mrs Mudu out of the way, the men proceeded to violently hack Mr Mudu with their weapons, slitting his throat.

Mrs Mudu told CSW that after hearing the men at the front door, her husband knew that their lives were in danger and that the men had bad intentions. He told his wife that he might be killed but assured her to remain strong and to never give up her faith in Jesus even if they killed him. She took her children and ran for help to the nearby houses, but no one came to her aid. CSW discovered that the villagers were afraid to offer her help as they had been warned by the perpetrators not to come out of their homes that night. After fleeing several kilometres, Mrs Mudu and her daughters took refuge in the home of another church member, where they spent the night.

Mr Mudu's body was discovered by his younger brother on the village road at approximately 10pm, at which point the police were alerted. An autopsy was carried out immediately and his funeral was conducted on the 8 June. Mrs Mudu told CSW that after the funeral, her father encouraged her to forsake her religion if she wanted to stay alive, reminding her that her mother was gang raped in 2018 in a previous attack on the family, and now she has lost her husband, to which she responded, "I will live for Jesus and die for Jesus, but I will never turn back."

According to Mrs Mudu, the villagers knew of her husband's Christian faith and that he was an active member of a local church, which is associated with the Hebron Assembly (Hyderabad). Mrs Mudu told CSW that her husband faced regular opposition from the local community after he converted to Christianity and was often called to village meetings to explain his faith. Threats to his life continued to increase because he refused to make any financial contribution to the local village prayers and participate in them.

In 2018 Mr Mudu and his family narrowly escaped an attack on their home, during which his mother-in-law was gang raped. Six men were charged for the crime of rape, but only five were arrested, convicted and sentenced to seven years imprisonment for the offence. The unnamed felon, who was never apprehended by the police, continued to harass Mr Mudu to withdraw the rape charge against him and threatened to harm Mr

Mudu if he did not forsake his faith. The harassment and threats by the unnamed felon and other unidentified persons continued for two years; occasionally they would harass Mr Mudu at his home late at night.

A First Information Report (FIR), required for the police to begin an investigation, has been registered in the murder of Mr Mudu. While investigations are ongoing, no suspects have been arrested thus far. Mrs Mudu and her children have taken refuge in an undisclosed location.

CSW's Chief Executive Mervyn Thomas said: *"Our deepest prayers and condolences go out to Mr Mudu's wife, Bindu and his family for the loss of a husband, father and son. Mr Mudu was murdered on account of his faith. We at CSW are increasingly concerned by the relentless harassment, discrimination and suffering that Christians in India face, simply for exercising their right to practise a religion that is different from the majority of their fellow citizens. India's constitution clearly states that "all persons are equally entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion." The culture of hatred towards religious minorities and the impunity which surrounds attacks against them is rampantly spreading across India. This must be addressed urgently and we urge the authorities in Jharkhand and the central government to develop a plan of action. Christians and other religious minorities must feel safe and be able to live in their homes and have livelihoods as equal citizens without fear of violence or harassment from any segment of the community."*

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## **In India, Coronavirus fans religious hatred**

***Indian officials are blaming an Islamic group for spreading the virus, and Muslims have been targeted in a wave of violence***

By Jeffrey Gettleman, Kai Schultz and Suhasini Raj

New York Times (12.04.2020) - <https://nyti.ms/2xwengH> - After India's health ministry repeatedly blamed an Islamic seminary for spreading the coronavirus — and governing party officials spoke of "human bombs" and "corona jihad" — a spree of anti-Muslim attacks has broken out across the country.

Young Muslim men who were passing out food to the poor were assaulted with cricket bats. Other Muslims have been beaten up, nearly lynched, run out of their neighborhoods or attacked in mosques, branded as virus spreaders. In Punjab State, loudspeakers at Sikh temples broadcast messages telling people not to buy milk from Muslim dairy farmers because it was infected with coronavirus.

Hateful messages have bloomed online. And a wave of apparently fake videos has popped up telling Muslims not to wear masks, not to practice social distancing, not to worry about the virus at all, as if the makers of the videos wanted Muslims to get sick. In a global pandemic, there is always the hunt for blame. President Trump has done it, insisting for a time on calling the coronavirus a "Chinese virus." All over the world people are pointing fingers, driven by their fears and anxieties to go after The Other.

Here in India, no other group has been demonized more than the country's 200 million Muslims, minorities in a Hindu-dominated land of 1.3 billion people.

From the crackdown on Kashmir, a Muslim majority area, to a new citizenship law that blatantly discriminates against Muslims, this past year has been one low point after

another for Indian Muslims living under an increasingly bold Hindu nationalist government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and propelled by majoritarian policies.

In this case, what's making things worse is that there's an element of truth behind the government's claims. A single Muslim religious movement has been identified as being responsible for a large share of India's 8,000-plus coronavirus cases. Indian officials estimated last week that more than a third of the country's cases were connected to the group, Tablighi Jamaat, which held a huge gathering of preachers in India in March. Similar meetings in [Malaysia](#) and [Pakistan](#) also led to outbreaks.

"The government was compelled to call out this congregation," said Vikas Swarup, a senior official at India's foreign ministry.

He said that the gathering in March "had a significant impact on the containment methods" but denied that the government's frequent blaming of the group had "anything to do with a particular community."

Tablighi Jamaat is a multinational Muslim missionary movement. A tall, white, modern building towering over the Nizamuddin West neighborhood of Delhi serves its global headquarters. The group is one of the world's largest faith-based organizations, with tens of millions of members.

The Indian government has been racing to track down anyone from Tablighi's seminary and quarantine congregants. Masked police officers have sealed the headquarters on all sides; the other morning, they patrolled the area with their fingers on the triggers of assault rifles.

The neighborhood resembles one near a bus depot or a port; the seminary was the center of the economy, and all around it stand money changers, guesthouses, travel agencies and gift shops, catering to the Muslim missionaries who would flow through here.

The virus and the new wave of hatred have changed everything. Mohammed Haider, who runs a milk stall, one of the few businesses allowed to stay open under India's coronavirus lockdown, said, "Fear is staring at us, from everywhere."

"People need only a small reason to beat us or to lynch us," he said. "Because of corona."

Muslim leaders are afraid. They see the intensifying attacks against Muslims and remember what happened in February, when [Hindu mobs rampaged in a working-class neighborhood in Delhi](#), killing dozens, and the police mostly stood aside — or sometimes even helped the Hindu mobs. In many villages now, Muslim traders are barred from entering simply because of their faith.

"The government should not have played the blame game," said Khalid Rasheed, the chairman of [Islamic Center of India](#). "If you present the cases based on somebody's religion in your media briefings," he said, "it creates a big divide."

"Coronavirus may die," he added, "but the virus of communal disharmony will be hard to kill when this is over."

Tahir Iqbal, a recent university graduate from Kashmir, was among the 4,000 or so gathered at the Tablighi Jamaat headquarters in early March for missionary training. He said people slept, ate and prayed in close quarters, with little fear of the coronavirus. "We didn't take it seriously at the time," he said.

On March 16, the Delhi government banned gatherings of more than 50 people. Several days later, Mr. Modi announced a nationwide lockdown.

But instead of dispersing, more than 1,000 people stayed put at the center. During a March 19 sermon, Maulana Saad Kandhalvi, a Tablighi Jamaat leader, told followers that coronavirus was "God's punishment" and not to fear it.

About a week later, health inspectors found around 1,300 people still sheltering at the center without masks or other protective gear. Many Muslim leaders criticized the group's center for not closing down.

But by that point, hundreds of congregants had already left. They wended their way across India by car, bus, train and plane, spreading the coronavirus to more than half of India's states, from beach towns in the Andaman Islands to the hot, farming cities in the country's northern plains.

On March 31, the Delhi authorities filed a criminal case against Maulana Kandhalvi for "deliberately, willfully, negligently and malignantly" putting the public's health at risk. Tablighi Jamaat's center was sealed. The maulana, a title for a Muslim scholar, disappeared.

Indian authorities have been tightening the lockdown on hot spots across the country, shutting down all movement in areas where coronavirus cases have been detected. Though the nationwide total remains relatively low, many fear the highly contagious virus could rip through crowded urban areas, overwhelming India's already beleaguered public hospitals.

Indian authorities have used cellphone data to track Tablighi Jamaat congregants and intercepted Malaysian missionaries at an airport before they could board an evacuation flight out of India.

At a public briefing last week, Lav Agarwal, a health ministry spokesman, said that the number of days it would have taken India's coronavirus cases to double would have been 7.4 — not the more alarming 4.1 days it hit this past week — had the gathering not happened.

Since then, more than 25,000 people who came in contact with Tablighi members have been quarantined. Some nurses have complained that Tablighi members put in isolation wards acted lewdly. One Muslim man who tested positive for coronavirus slit his throat in a central Indian hospital on Saturday.

Some Hindu nationalist politicians and their supporters seized on the situation, eagerly piling on the anti-Muslim sentiments that have been building in recent years under Mr. Modi's government.

Raj Thackeray, the leader of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, a far-right nationalist party, told local news outlets that Tablighi Jamaat members "should be shot."

Rajeev Bindal, a leader within Mr. Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party, said Tablighi members were moving through the population "like human bombs."

In the village of Harewali, near Delhi, a mob beat Mehboob Ali, a young Muslim man, for attending Tablighi Jamaat events, and filmed the beating.

"Tell us your plan!" someone shouts in the video. "Was your plan to spread corona?"

Mr. Ali, bloodied and crouching in a field, shakes his head.

Sensing the backlash against Muslims, India's health ministry has stopped blaming Tablighi Jamaat at public briefings.

"Certain communities and areas are being labeled purely based on false reports," the health ministry said in [a statement](#) a few days ago. "There is an urgent need to counter such prejudices."

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## Row over Hindu conversion of tribal Christians in India

### *Hindu group Sangh Parivar accused of divide-and-rule tactics in Gujarat*

UCA News (28.01.2020) - <http://bit.ly/36TzrDe> - Church leaders and activists in India have criticized a Hindu group, which claims to have reconverted tribal Christians in Gujarat's Dang district.

As many as 144 members of a tribal community who had embraced Christianity many years ago were converted back to Hinduism in Bhogadiya village of Waghai taluka, a religious leader said.

The event on Jan. 24 was organized by the Gujarat unit of Agniveer, a Hindu organization based in the district.

"The agenda of the Sangh Parivar (communal forces) has always been divisive and discriminatory and this is clearly visible in their so-called *ghar wapasi* (reconversion) program. For several weeks now, the Sanghis have been trying their best to vitiate the atmosphere in the area," Father Cedric Prakash, a human rights activist, told UCA News. Jesuit Father Prakash, who is based in state capital Ahmedabad, added: "Their game, as in the past, is to divide and rule, to spread rumors and falsehoods. A very convenient manipulative act of theirs is this so-called *ghar wapasi* program.

"No one is sure whether these [converted Christians] are locals or brought from outside or for that matter if these were actually Christians. Anyway, for those in the Catholic Church, we are convinced that the faith of the people is unflinching."

Neha Patel, state president of Agniveer, told media that "we came to know that many tribals were converted to Christianity many years ago and many of them expressed interest to convert back to Hinduism, so we organized this program."

He claimed that out of 144 people who converted to Hinduism, 60 were from Bhogadiya village while the rest were from neighboring villages.

"We have not forced anybody to change their religion. Since long ago, Christian missionaries have been converting Hindu tribals to Christianity. We will continue holding similar drives to bring more tribal Christians back to Hinduism," Patel said.

Sajan K. George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, said that "no Hindu organization ever brought succor to the Dangs the way the Christian missions did. The Church came here a century ago when there was little but despair.

"Where were all these Hindu leaders when they were rotting in poverty? These preachers showed us the true path and gave us dignity."

Dang district police superintendent Shweta Shrimali said officers had attended the conversion venue. "No complaints have been registered against anybody. We will probe if the conversion happened voluntarily," she added.

Ramu Chaudhary, one of the tribals who converted to Hinduism, said: "I embraced Christianity around eight years ago. I was very sick at that time and the missionary people took good care of me. After I was cured, I converted to Christianity. Now I realize that since my ancestors were Hindu, why remain a Christian?"

India's Freedom of Religion Acts or anti-conversion laws are state-level statutes that have been enacted to regulate religious conversions. The laws are in force in eight out of 29 states: Arunachal Pradesh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand.

The laws seek to prevent any person from converting or attempting to convert, either directly or otherwise, another person through forcible or fraudulent means, or by allurement or inducement.

However, the anti-conversion laws in Rajasthan and Arunachal Pradesh appear to exclude reconversions to native or original faiths.

Penalties for breaching the laws are one to three years of imprisonment and fines from 5,000 to 50,000 Indian rupees (US\$74 to US\$735).

Some laws provide for stiffer penalties if women, children or members of scheduled castes or scheduled tribes are being converted.

Despite criticism of India's anti-conversion laws, human rights bodies have acknowledged that these laws have resulted in few arrests and no convictions. However, some observers note that the laws create a hostile, and sometimes violent, environment for religious minority communities because they do not require any evidence to support accusations of wrongdoing.

India is home to a diversity of religious beliefs and practices. The subcontinent is the birthplace of four major world religions — Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. According to 2011 census data, 80 percent of the population of India is Hindu, 14 percent Muslim, 2.3 percent Christian, 1.7 percent Sikh, 0.7 percent Buddhist and 0.4 percent Jain.