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Calls for Muslim genocide grow louder. Modi's silence is an endorsement.

By Rana Ayyub

Washington Post (29.12.2021) - <https://wapo.st/3mLZRS6> - "The first time it was reported that our friends were being butchered there was a cry of horror. Then a hundred were butchered. But when a thousand were butchered and there was no end to the butchery, a blanket of silence spread. When evil-doing comes like falling rain, nobody calls out 'stop!'"

These lines, written by the German poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht, came to me as I heard the horrifying speeches delivered by Hindu nationalists during a religious conference this month, when leaders issued direct calls for genocide against Muslims.

"If 100 of us are ready to kill two million of them, then we will win," said [Pooja Shakun Pandey](#), a leader of Hindu Mahasabha, a militant [organization](#), at a conference in the city of Haridwar, 150 miles north of New Delhi. "Be ready to kill and go to jail."

At the same event, another Hindu seer invoked the crackdown against Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar as a model for what can be done to drive Muslims away, [a monstrous event that has been covered in the media](#).

The Dharma Sansad (Hindu convention) was attended by members of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's ruling party. Videos of the packed event have been circulating on social media. Attendees made pledges to turn India into a Hindu nation. Unsurprisingly, the calls for violence and extermination have been met with silence by Modi and others — a silence that translates as an endorsement.

Inciting violence is a crime in India, but Pandey and the other speakers remain free. The police are supposed to be investigating but have been very slow to act — since they know full well these leaders have the protection of the ruling political class.

In fact, these Hindu leaders have now been emboldened to form a paramilitary force of monks who they [claim will lead an armed fight against the 220 million Muslim population in India](#).

Days after the conference, Tejaswi Surya, Modi's handpicked youth leader and a BJP member of parliament, called for bringing Indian Muslims and Christians back to Hinduism, "the mother religion." [He then tried to walk back his comments](#).

What is happening in India, where calls for genocide and ethnic cleansing are a centerpiece of our political debates? Where the Hindu nationalist who assassinated Mohandas K. Gandhi, a global symbol of nonviolent resistance, [is glorified by national leaders](#).

What is happening in India, where the majority Hindu community fails to repudiate acts of terror unleashed in its name? Where Muslims [are lynched on the streets](#), where [Christmas celebrations are attacked](#), where the government has blocked the charity of human rights icon and Nobel laureate Mother Teresa [from receiving international donations](#).

What is happening in India, where Suresh Chavhanke, the influential owner of a right-wing nationalist news channel, calls for people to "[fight, die and kill if required](#)" to make India a "Hindu nation" at an event on Dec. 19 in the national capital as the cameras rolled and the police looked on.

What is happening in India, where law enforcement is [more likely to investigate journalists over tweets](#) and [the sons of critical public figures](#) over alleged marijuana possession, than go after fanatics calling for mass murder?

What is happening in India, where the captain of the Indian cricket team, Virat Kohli, [loses his position for defending a Muslim colleague](#) who was targeted for his faith? The answer is as loud and clear as the hate spewed at those events, as the mobs that have been given a free pass to attack minorities.

Not only does Modi's silence give encouragement to the most dangerous elements threatening India, but the silence of our allies is also enabling them.

During the "Summit for Democracy" hosted earlier this month by President Biden, Modi [claimed to be a champion of free speech, rule of law and a secular and pluralistic ethos](#), but the world is seeing how he and his party are willing to rely on threats, dog whistles, intimidation and violence to consolidate control. All these calls for genocide are happening in the context of state elections. Is this the type of "democracy" Biden and other allies are championing?

Modi has cultivated this type of hate for decades. We know what's happening in India now. I fear what will come next.

Photo : Women from various districts are seen near cutouts of India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi at a rally held by Modi on Dec. 21. (Ritesh Shukla/Getty Images)

Indian Christians fear attacks or jail over conversions

By Imran Qureshi

BBC (20.12.2021) - <https://bbc.in/3petmxy> - One Sunday in October, Pastor Somu Avaradhi got a shock when he entered his church in Hubballi city in the southern Indian state of Karnataka.

"There were people sitting inside, singing Hindu religious songs and shouting slogans," he told the BBC.

He says he called the police, but when they arrived, the protesters accused him of abusing and forcing a Hindu man to convert to Christianity. The pastor was arrested - under charges of "outraging the religious feelings of any class" - and spent 12 days in prison before he was released on bail.

This isn't an isolated incident - a [report](#) by the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) listed 39 cases of threats or violence against Christians from January to November this year in Karnataka.

These include alleged attacks on pastors by members of right-wing Hindu groups, and even instances where they reportedly physically prevented them from holding religious services. Christians are a tiny minority in overwhelmingly Hindu India.

The frequency, Christian representatives say, has increased since October, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which is in power in Karnataka as well as nationally, said it was working on a "strong" law against religious conversion in the state.

Critics have described the current draft of the bill as "draconian" - it includes jail terms of up to 10 years for those who are found guilty of converting others by "force", "fraudulent" methods or marriage, and possibly a denial of government benefits to those who convert from one religion to another.

Every such decision will be scrutinised since those who choose to convert will be required to notify local officials two months before - and officials will investigate the reasons before allowing it to happen.

Christian leaders are worried that the new bill will embolden Hindu radicals to further target the community. The fear is exacerbated, commentators say, by an increasingly polarising environment under Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP in which minority communities feel **targeted and threatened**.

"Once the bill is passed, we will have to wait for more persecution and more difficulties," Peter Machado, Archbishop of Bangalore, told BBC Hindi.

The bill is modelled on a law introduced last year in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, also governed by the BJP. There, **the law sought to target so-called "love jihad"**, a popular Hindu right wing conspiracy that Muslim men lure Hindu women into converting by proposing marriage. State police have since registered more than 100 cases of alleged forcible conversion, the **Print** news website reported in November.

The Reverend Vijayesh Lal, general secretary of EFI, which runs 65,000 churches in India, alleged that the pattern in Karnataka was similar to what happened in Uttar Pradesh before the law was introduced.

"You push the community, you take them down, you level false allegations of conversion and then bring in a law which is unconstitutional," he said.

Religious conversion is a controversial topic in India. Right-wing groups have long accused Christian missionaries of forcibly converting poor Hindus by offering them money or other support as bribes - a claim they deny.

But Dalits (formerly untouchables) have historically been known to convert to Christianity to escape a rigid Hindu caste hierarchy. Despite laws to protect them, the community is routinely the victim of not just discrimination but also violence.

These tensions have often translated into violence on the ground - in 1999, a spate of attacks on Christian institutions in the eastern state of Orissa (also known as Odisha) was followed by the **horrific murders** of an Australian missionary and his two young sons as they slept in a jeep.

Christian pastors and priests in Karnataka say they are fearful for the future. Initially, the attacks were limited to a few pockets in the state, but now 21 out of 31 districts have reported at least one violent incident.

"I have been here for 40 years but I don't really know why these conversion allegations are coming now. We have a lot of friends among the Hindu community here," said the Reverend Thomas T, president of the pastors' association in Belagavi district.

Mr Thomas says that in November, local police informally told the association not to hold prayer meetings to avoid attacks by right-wing groups.

A police official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told BBC Hindi that while individual police stations have advised priests to be careful, there was no "state-wide policy" on the issue.

Father Francis D'Souza, a priest at a local church in Belagavi, alleged last week that a man with a sword tried to attack him. The case is being investigated and top police officials have assured Father D'Souza that he will be protected.

"But that fear is still there in me," he says.

Representatives from the community have questioned the need for an anti-conversion law, pointing out that India's constitution gives the right to everyone to "propagate religion".

There is no national law restricting religious conversion, and attempts in the past to introduce such bills in parliament have failed. But various states have enacted legislation over the years to regulate religious conversion.

BJP lawmaker Arvind Bellad, who led a massive protest against Pastor Somu, asked why only Christians are worried about the new bill.

"The interesting aspect is that other minority communities like Muslims or Sikhs or Jains are not worried about this new law," he added.

State chief minister Basvaraj Bommai has said that only those who try to lure people into converting to a different religion need to fear the law.

But Archbishop Machado says that the attacks and the discourse around the bill are clearly aimed at Christians.

"It is not a good thing that the government is doing to us," he said.

Social commentator and retired Maj Gen SG Vombatkere said that people should not take the law into their hands.

"If I have a complaint against you, I cannot come and beat you up," he said. "I have no business to attack you, whatever you may have done. But the unusual is becoming the usual these days."

Photo : Christians are a religious minority in India – Getty Images

Religious conversion is silent invasion, shouldn't be allowed: Karnataka CM Bommai

The Chief Minister said that the anti-conversion Bill would be introduced as the conversion is a threat to society

Deccan Herald (20.12.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3J7xHKM> - Terming religious conversion a silent invasion, Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai on Monday said the menace of conversion should not be allowed to grow in society.

"Hindus were often invaded leading to large-scale religious conversions from time to time. If you see people from other religions around us, they were originally Hindus. Besides the geographical invasion, there is a religious invasion happening in the country. If geographical invasion happens openly, religious invasion happens slowly," Bommai said during an event organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad.

Seers of various Maths under the banner of VHP and Bajrang Dal organised the event urging the Chief Minister to bring the anti-conversion Bill he had been talking about. According to the VHP sources, the event was organised as a few missionary organisations are opposing the Bill by saying that it was against the Constitution.

The Chief Minister said that the anti-conversion Bill would be introduced as the conversion is a threat to society.

According to Bommai, the attempt to change the cultural background through allurements is unethical and unjust, which is the root of the problem. Religious conversion is not about increasing the strength but changing the mindset. It would have a huge impact on society, hence should not be allowed to grow, the Chief Minister said.

"Initially it is coercion and allurements, then it becomes a disease and later a menace. Our society, State and the nation should not allow this to happen," Bommai told the Seers. Stating that poverty and disabilities are often misused to lure people to change their faith, Bommai said there was a need to bring a law because there is no scope for coercion and allurements in the Indian Constitution. In this regard, a law was needed to stop such practice, he said.

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The Chief Minister called upon the Seers, too, to start a social movement against conversion to start identifying and addressing the root cause of the problem, as Adiguru Shankaracharya did.

"The government will do its job but the Seers here have to think about a mega social movement. I have faith in the Seers gathered here. We have to work together to save our religion. We will follow whatever decision you take," Bommai told the gathering.

He claimed that the Congress government in Karnataka had thought of bringing a law banning religious conversion in 2016 but due to vested political interests, they could not do so.

Speaking about the proposed anti-conversion Bill his government intends to bring, he said he cannot disclose the content of the matter because the legislative session was in progress. However, he said the process to enact the law was on different levels.

Bomma had earlier said his government would bring the law and the draft was ready. Any marriage done only to change someone's faith would be declared void, according to the draft. It also says those changing religion should give prior notice to the district administration at least 60 days in advance so that an inquiry can be conducted into it whether the change in faith is by choice or by coercion.

Photo : Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai. Credit: PTI Photo

Nationalists want Hindu statue displayed in a Christian school in Madhya Pradesh

by Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (26.10.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3Erezo4> - A group of Hindu nationalists gave the principal of the Christ Jyoti Secondary School "15 days to install the statue" of the goddess Saraswati. For Archbishop Machado, secretary general of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India, the "constitutional guarantees" of minorities "should not be called into question".



Hindu nationalist activists yesterday targeted the Christ Jyoti Senior Secondary School, a Catholic school in Satna, a district in the northern Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, demanding that a statue of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of knowledge, be placed within the school as soon as possible.

"A group of young people from the Bajrang Dal[*] handed me a memorandum demanding that a statue of the goddess Saraswati be placed inside the school," principal Father Augustine Chittuparambil told *AsiaNews*.

"According to the false accusations made against us, we allegedly removed the statue some months ago and now we have to remedy the situation," Fr Augustine said. "These are absolutely false allegations. This is a Catholic school run by the Diocese of Satna. There have never been any altars or photos of Saraswati here," he added.

For the clergyman, certain vested political interests are behind the story. He noted that "They gave me 15 days to install the statue. After that, they threatened to cause unrest and strikes."

Fr Augustine explained that the school has always served the community without caste or creed discrimination. "Over 3,000 students are enrolled, most of them majority Hindu; only about 50 children are Christian," he said.

The Indian Catholic Church is standing by the school principal, and the principle of religious freedom in the school.

"This type of action is aimed at intimidating minorities and putting political pressure," said Mgr Leo Cornelio, S.V.D., Archbishop emeritus of Bhopal. "We must take a clear position and appeal to the country's authorities to respect the constitutional rights of minorities."

Archbishop Felix Machado of Vasai agrees. "The image of our country must not be tarnished on the global stage by religious claims of this type," said the prelate, speaking to *AsiaNews*.

"We live in the third millennium and there are constitutional guarantees that should not be called into question," added the prelate who is also general secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI).

"The Catholic Church is providing exemplary service in the field of education and healthcare, serving the community, regardless of caste or creed," he said.

As a scholar of Hinduism, the prelate has "deep respect for this religion." For this reason, he is "saddened by the behaviour of certain militants who are misguided about their religion."

"This is a time to talk and to listen to each other; dialogue is the only way to go forward."

Catholic religious to move India's Supreme Court over tax order

Priests and nuns argue that unlike diocesan priests they have taken a vow of poverty and should not be taxed



A file photo of some 500 Catholic nuns protesting in front of a newspaper office in Kerala on Sept. 4, 2019. (Photo supplied)

UCA News (10.08.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3Gyh6P6> - Catholic religious congregations in Kerala are to challenge a state court's order which withdrew tax exemption that religious priests and nuns enjoyed as employees of government-aided educational institutions for decades.

The court in the southern Indian state refused to accept their argument that they do not take their salaries for their personal use but instead they go to their respective religious societies.

"We have now decided to appeal against the order before the Supreme Court of India," said Father Jacobi Sebastian, president of the Kerala Conference of Major Superiors.

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Father Sebastian, a member of the Oblates of St. Joseph, told UCA News on Aug. 9 that they are also planning a larger meeting of church officials, major superiors and financial consultants on Aug. 16 to chart the next steps.

The court quoted the Bible to say "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's."

"We are reminded of the above teachings of Jesus Christ ... while we consider an engrossing question on the liability of tax deduction at source from the salary paid to teachers who are nuns or priests of the religious congregations," the court said.

The court also said canon law has no overriding impact 'on the laws of the land'

The legal clash began in 2014 after the federal Income Tax Department ordered an end to tax exemption given to the Catholic religious priests and nuns since 1944. It asked the government treasury to deduct tax before paying salaries.

Three priests and a nun challenged the order soon after it was issued. A single bench of Kerala High Court dismissed their demand for exemption and upheld the Income Tax Department's order.

The petitioners appealed before a higher bench of the court along with 49 others, but the court dismissed their demand on July 13.

The lawyers of the petitioners also quoted from the Church's canon law to say that people who take "a perpetual vow of poverty" undergo a civil death and thereafter they are not considered persons under the Church's laws.

Such an argument, the court said, is "too far-fetched and is legally untenable." The court also said canon law has no overriding impact "on the laws of the land."

The court said canon law cannot be extended to cover all situations in the life of a nun or a priest or situations governed by statutes enacted by the legislature. The income tax law does not recognize the concept of civil death.

The petitioners also argued that tax deduction infringes upon their "right to profess, practice and propagate religion" guaranteed in the Indian constitution.

But the court said if a valid law permits deduction of tax, "we find ourselves at a loss to assimilate the scope of the contention that deduction of tax at source violates the fundamental right to freedom of religion. We reject the said contention."

A section of Catholics, including some priests, said the priests and nuns should accept the verdict and pay tax just as other citizens. They warn that moving Supreme Court would only waste time and resources.

The religious keep no income on their own and if they need to be a taxpayer a lot of changes will have to be made in the functioning of religious congregations

"I was a teacher in a government-aided institution and I paid my taxes like any other employee. The religious should not seek such exemption," said a diocesan priest, who asked not to be named.

Father Sebastian admitted that diocesan priests pay their taxes but that is because "they do not take a vow of poverty," he said.

"The religious keep no income on their own and if they need to be a taxpayer a lot of changes will have to be made in the functioning of religious congregations," Father Sebastian said.

Madras High Court, the state court in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, in March 2019 also ordered religious priests and nuns to pay taxes on their salaries.

The Tamil Nadu religious have now moved the Supreme Court and the top court has given a temporary suspension of the execution of the high court's order.

Court blocks 'blasphemous' Indian movie accused of defaming Catholics

Kerala court suspends the online release of 'Aquarium' after complaints about sex scenes involving priests and nuns

By Saji Thomas

UCA News (14.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3hw56nc> - A court in India has suspended for two weeks the release of a "blasphemous" movie following allegations that it insults Christians by portraying Catholic priests and nuns as "mere sex toys."

The High Court in southern India's Kerala state on May 12 halted the release of Aquarium, a movie in the state's Malayalam language, while accepting a petition against it.

Delhi High Court in the national capital also agreed to hear a similar petition and scheduled a hearing for May 17.

The movie was set to be released online on May 14.

Aquarium, completed in 2013, failed to hit the screens that year as India's Central Board of Film Certification denied permission because of its controversial and offensive content, said lawyer George Poonthottam.

Poonthottam, who appeared for petitioners Sister Josia S.D. and Sister Mary K.G in Kerala High Court, told UCA News that the movie's producers had recently gained the film board's certification "through fraud despite its malicious contents."

"The movie hurts the religious sentiments of Christians, especially Catholics, as it portrayed priests and nuns in a poor light," Poonthottam said.

The producers initially named the movie Pithavinum Puthranum Parisudhathmavinum (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) but renamed it Aquarium as part of a clandestine attempt to get it released online, he said.

"They have hidden this fact of the name change from [the film certification] board, which had earlier blocked its release on account of its controversial and maligning content," Poonthottam said.

Sister Jessy Mani, a member of the Sacred Heart Congregation who filed the petition in Delhi High Court, said the movie trivialized the life of Catholic priests and nuns by "portraying them as mere sex toys."

In India's Gujarat state, new anti-conversion law threatens Christians, Muslims

By Jose Kavi & Saji Thomas

Aid to the Church in Need (10.05.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3eGFXEd> - CATHOLIC CHURCH LEADERS IN INDIA have opposed an anti-conversion law passed by Gujarat state, saying it goes against the Indian Constitution which allows citizens to profess, practice and propagate a religion of their choice. Opponents want the western Indian state government to abrogate the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act 2021, which was passed on April 1.

Jesuit Father Cedric Prakash, a well-known human rights activist based in Ahmedabad, Gujarat's commercial hub, said under the new "draconian" law even "a blessing given in good faith to a person from different religion can be construed as an attempt to religious conversion." Gujarat had already enacted an anti-conversion in 2003; the new act is its amended form and includes stringent provisions for up to 10 years jail and a fine of up to 500,000 Indian rupees (\$6750), Prakash told Aid to the Church in Need (ACN).

The nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) that now rules the state amended the law for the purpose of checking the "love jihad," mostly to target Muslim youths who allegedly feign love to marry girls from other religions and convert them to Islam.

According to Prakash, the new law targets both Christians and Muslims. "Other religions in the country are considered part of Hinduism, India's main religion." The Hindu nationalists oppose Christianity and Islam because of their foreign origin and target their followers, accusing them of promoting religious conversion or eating beef, among other things.

"A mere divine blessing or a suggestion for a better lifestyle can be termed as violation of the new law, making the life of a Christian or Muslim miserable in their country where freedom of religion is paramount," said the Jesuit.

The new law does not allow a Christian or Muslim man to marry a girl from another religion. Such marriages would be treated as illegal under the charge that the marriage was performed for converting the woman to the religion of the man, the priest explained.

Meanwhile, the Supreme Court of India, the top court in the country, declared on April 9 that “people are free to choose their religion and have the right under the Constitution to profess, practice and propagate” that religion.

The top court also asserted that individuals 18 and over are free to their religion, asking the petitioner to withdraw a petition containing a demand for the court to direct the federal government to pass a national law to check religion conversion.

The court’s ruling has had no impact on the Gujarat government, which vehemently opposes any demand for the law’s repeal. That law also provides for punishments of priests who preside over conversion ceremonies.

“In case someone wants to convert, he or she must notify the designated government officer who, after conducting a probe, would have to permit the conversion. Failing that, the conversion would be considered a crime,” Father Prakash said, asking: “As religion is a very personal and individual issue, how can a state interfere with it?”

Since the state government remains adamant about enforcing the new law, a group of social activists under the Citizens for Justice and Peace banner has challenged the law before the Supreme Court. The same petition has also challenged similar laws in three other states— Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh—all BJP-ruled states, said Father Prakash, one of the petitioners.

The new anti-conversion laws in these states, Father Prakash charged, “are a real threat to minorities, especially Christians and Muslims.” Christians form 2.3 percent and Muslims 14.2 percent of India’s population of 1.37 billion people.

Photo : Father Cedric Prakash – Aid to the Church in Need

The death of secularism in India: « Homecoming » in the name of the Hindu rashtra

By CSW’s Asia Team leader

FORB in full (26.04.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3vvRPPf> - In 2014, months after the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came into power, Praveen Togadia, the former President of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council [VHP]), said that his organisation will work towards making India a 100% Hindu nation.

This vision of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) has continued to intensify over the past six years, with rhetoric promoting old narratives that all Indians are Hindus despite their religion or belief, as well as suggestions that Muslims in the country are perpetrating a “love jihad” campaign to strengthen Islamic influence, and that Western governments are providing support for the proselytisation of Christianity.

Misinformation and disinformation have been rife in India for decades. In 1999, false assertions about foreign missionaries preceded the horrific killing of the Australian Graham Staines and his two sons in Orissa (now Odisha). This marked a rise in suspicion towards and violence against Christians, which has continued to date.

Several states have recently introduced laws that regulate conversion, including Jharkhand (2017), Uttarakhand (2018) and Uttar Pradesh (2020), as well as others such

as Madhya Pradesh (2021) and Gujarat (2021) that have passed stricter amendments to their existing laws. The result of this: the boundaries of faith have increasingly become the interest of the state. It is also a trend concerningly likely to be pursued by other states should the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) pick up more electoral votes in state elections this year.

« **Homecoming** »

Separately from such legislation, communal issues like *ghar wapsi* or 'homecoming' ceremonies have become the primary tool used by Hindu nationalist groups like the VHP and its militant youth arm, the Bajrang Dal, to chastise Christians and Muslims in the effort to reclaim the Hindu nation. These typically involve ceremonies of humiliation in which non-Hindus are converted to the Hindu religion.

The RSS's ideology of Hindutva, which regards Hindus as superior to other religions or belief, says that they do not convert people but help them return to their original faith. According to Champat Rai, the Vice President of VHP, the primary mission of establishing the organisation is to carry out "homecoming" campaigns, which local monitoring sources say is a problem that primarily besieges the Scheduled Caste and Adivasi (tribal) communities, who are largely poor with little or no education.

Uttar Pradesh, where there is a high density of Schedule Caste, has recorded the highest number of ghar wapsi ceremonies, with the tribal belt states of Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh also generally known as hotbeds for such incidents.

While the factors influencing *ghar wapsi* are complex and hard to quantify, some trends reveal the methods used by Hindu nationalist groups. Incorporating social media propaganda and fear tactics, their campaigns undermine fundamental freedoms and rights.

A common method featured in the *ghar wapsi* rhetoric is the making of hyperbolic claims about the numbers of reconversions. In Garhwa District, Jharkhand, the Naybharat Times [reported](#) on 15 March 2021 that 181 people from 35 tribal families had been reconverted to 'Sarna' (nature worship), which local monitoring sources have disproved as an exaggeration of numbers.

The recycling of content on social media to portray as if it were a recent event is also used to gain the confidence of supporters that the Hindu *rashtra* project is progressing. According to local sources, in a [video](#) published on 5 April 2021, 27 Christians from Khala village, Dhurki District, Jharkhand, were presented to have undergone *ghar wapsi*. The video was shared repeatedly on social media to mislead the public, when in actual fact only six people were reconverted.

At other times, false narratives are created as justifications for *ghar wapsi* whereby tribal communities are forced to discredit Christianity. On 16 March 2021, an estimated 50 tribal men and women in Chartra, Jharkhand, were made to say that they were allured into Christianity and had decided to reconvert. Local monitoring sources say that such outcomes are a result of constant harassment resulting in fear of retribution by Hindu nationalist groups.

The death of secularism in India

For the *Rashtriya Swayemsewak Sangh (RSS)*, "conversion" is considered an intrusion of the motherland and an existential threat to the pre-eminence of Hinduism. Mohan Bhagwat, the RSS chief, once warned minorities not to convert Hindus, referring to them as intruders.

As the debate over conversions continues with fervour from the BJP camp to gain political points in the state electoral process, the preservation of India's secular fabric is being dismantled, adversely affecting the freedom of choice of thought, conscience and religion.

With a playing field that is far short of what was envisaged by the architects of the Indian constitution, the battle for the people's soul is based on rules that are dictated by Hindu nationalism and those who wield the news media that will browbeat religious minorities into submission.

Photo : A ghar wapsi ceremony – forbinfull.org

Madhya Pradesh releases nun accused of violating anti-conversion law

Sister Baghya had filed a complaint against her accuser. The nun will have to cooperate with the investigation. For the president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, "everything can be exploited and distorted by anti-conversion legislation used as a political tool by religious nationalists."

by Nirmala Carvalho

AsiaNews (18.03.2021) – <https://bit.ly/3IAu9W1> - Madhya Pradesh's High Court on Tuesday granted bail to the principal of a missionary school, who became the object of an investigation on 22 February on charges of psychological harassment against a female teacher in an attempt to force her to convert.

Sister Baghya, a member of the Sisters of the Destitute, faced arrest after police charged her with violating the state's **anti-conversion laws**.

"Sister Bhagya has submitted that the complaint is false and registered only out of a sense of frustration experienced by the teacher, Ruby Singh, on account of her termination from service at the school," said Judge Atul Sreedharan.

The school principal had lodged a complaint with the sub-divisional magistrate on 17 February explaining that the teacher was fired because of poor performance and lack of documents and that the woman threatened to commit self-immolation if she was not reinstated.

On 20 February, the same complaint was forwarded to the SDO (P). The complaint against the nun was filed two days later.

"It is clear that Ruby Singh falsely implicated the principal Sister Bhagya by levelling the allegations of forced conversion against her and her family," the judge said.

The court in Jabalpur asked the accused to cooperate with the police in the investigation and granted her freedom upon payment of a bail of 10,000 rupees (about 0). The case was adjourned until April 7.

Ruby Singh filed her complaint with the police in the presence of leaders of the Vishwa Hindu Parshad, a Hindu nationalist organisation, claiming to belong to a lower-middle-class family and to have been pressured by Sister Baghya to convert.

She also claimed that the principal used undignified words about her religion and that she stopped receiving her wages before she was fired after she refused to change religion.

"The Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Ordinance was introduced in January and **converted into law** on 8 March," said Sajan K George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), speaking to *AsiaNews*.

"Of the 23 cases recorded so far, more than 60 per cent see Christians as the accused. It is just a way of arrest and prosecute members of the small Christian community with false accusations of conversion.

"Its wording is broad and vague so that anything can be interpreted as allurements or inducement to convert.

"The educational apostolate, the health apostolate, the social initiatives of the Catholic Church, everything can be exploited and distorted by anti-conversion legislation used as a political tool by religious nationalists," George explained.

Madhya Pradesh also passes new anti-conversion law

By Nirmala Carvalho

Hindu nationalists in the state legislature voted the bill on 8 March as a gift to women. For the president of the Global Council of Indian Christians, the law "promotes hatred, divisions and tensions between different communities", and endangers vulnerable minority Christians.

AsiaNews (09.03.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3taFS0d> - Another Indian state has passed an anti-conversion law. After **Uttar Pradesh** and Uttarakhand, both ruled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Madhya Pradesh yesterday became the third Indian state to pass such legislation.

This is causing great concern among Christians; the new law "promotes hatred, divisions and tensions between different communities within society," said Sajan K. George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC), speaking to *AsiaNews*.

The state's Home Affairs Minister Narottam Mishra officially introduced the *Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Bill 2021* on 1 March to replace an ordinance in force since 9 January. The bill was voted yesterday. BJP state legislators called it a gift for women on their day.

"Under the new bill, forcing religious conversion on someone will attract one to five years of imprisonment and a minimum Rs 25,000 fine (US\$ 350)," said Narottam Mishra.

"Forced conversion of a minor, a woman or a person from a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe would draw a minimum jail term of two to 10 years with a minimum penalty of Rs 50,000 (US\$ 700)."

"In secular India, it is absolutely inconsistent for a state to indicate which religion a person can follow or who they can marry," said George.

"The Indian constitution is secular. There is no state religion and this law is a flagrant violation of personal freedoms," he added.

"The right to freedom of religion in Article 25 to practise, profess and propagate a religion is part of the guarantees enshrined in the constitution."

Anti-conversion laws, ironically called 'Freedom of Religion' laws, have existed in Indian states for a long time, the first one in Odisha (formerly Orissa).

According to **data collected** by the police in Madhya Pradesh, since the Ordinance came into effect on 9 January, "of the 23 cases, at least half of them concern Christians," George explained. "All of them are fabricated cases of conversion. Vigilante groups attack, intimidate, even disrupt family gatherings under the guise of conversion activities."

For George, nationalist right-wing groups enjoy tacit state approval. "They endanger lives among vulnerable minority Christians with violence."

"The theory of conversions is widespread in the country even though the majority group still represents 80 per cent of society".

Photo : AsiaNews

Hindutva, the political ideology that puts Christians under suspicion

Vijayesh Lal, leader of the Evangelical Fellowship of India, says Christians are making a difference in times of Covid-19: "Local churches are providing relief to their neighbouring communities".

Evangelical Focus (22.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2ZHAXqS> - In recent years, India has become one of the most dangerous countries for religious minorities, which continuously suffer violence, intimidation, harassment, police impunity, and even murder.

"Democracy is being challenged to a greater degree today in India, freedom of expression is under threat, human rights and **freedom of religion, specially for minorities like Christians and Muslims, are also being challenged**", said **pastor Vijayesh Lal**, General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI), in an interview for the podcast *Didomi*.

According to Lal, the current situation has worsened because "the last year has seen **many states coming up with their anti-conversion laws**. Ironically, some are titled Freedom of Religion Acts, but they actually restrict freedom of religion".

“They are very strict, put into question every conversion per se, they **see every conversion with suspicion until it is proved that is genuine**, and the burden of proof lies on the one who has been accused”, underlined the EFI General Secretary.

Hindutva and violence against Christians

Twice a year, the Religious Liberty Commission of the EFI releases its **report Hate and Targeted Violence against Christians**. It began “in the late 1990s, when the whole conversion propaganda against the church in India started. Since then, we have advocated for religious freedom, documenting cases of atrocities against religious minorities”.

“At the beginning, the cases we reported were around 100-150. **Since 2014, cases have been rising**, reaching 366 in 2019 and 327 in 2020. Just in the first month of 2021, we have already recorded 29”, pointed out Lal.

The EFI General Secretary explained that the violence against religious minorities **“comes from a political ideology called Hindutva**, which is not to be confused with Hinduism, because Hinduism is a religion, and Hindutva strives for political control and it is based on exclusion”.

“It has connections with the Nazis. The **heads of this ideology are currently on power in India**. It started in the 1920s. However, I have no doubt that the ideology of Hindutva will eventually fail, because it is essentially against the character of India”, he added.

“I pray for more understanding from the international community”

The EFI General Secretary also lamented that “the world knows that Muslims have been targeted in India, but **there is little understanding about how Christians are being targeted**”

“I **hope and pray for more understanding from the international community**, that they will be aware of the persecution and they will use their voice to ask the Indian government to take steps to protect the religious minorities, Christians included”, he stressed.

“Covid-19 has been an opportunity for the church”

The coronavirus pandemic has severely hit India, however, “even in the midst of persecution, the church in India continues to give, and **Covid-19 has been an opportunity** to show, love, compassion and the values of the Kingdom”, said Lal.

“I do not know of any local church or denomination that has not gone out to provide relief to its neighbouring community. We are not going to stop, we do this because we love Christ and we also love our people”, concluded the EFI General Secretary.

Photo : New Delhi, India. / Sergio Capuzzimati, Unsplash CC0.

India: 23 'forced' conversion cases filed in 23 days of new anti-conversion law

By Anugrah Kumar,

Christian Post (17.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3dwG8BY> - Police in India's central state of Madhya Pradesh registered 23 cases of "forced" conversion in the first 23 days of the implementation of a new and strict "anti-conversion" law, according to media reports, indicating that the ongoing persecution of religious minorities is likely to further intensify.

"Twenty-three cases were registered under the newly passed Freedom of Religion Ordinance 2020 in January in Madhya Pradesh," the state's interior minister, Narottam Mishra, who is from the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, said, according to [The Times of India](#).

The ordinance, which came into force on Jan. 9 and will affect mostly Muslim and Christian minorities, was passed under the pretext of "love jihad," a term coined by Hindu nationalists to claim that Hindu women were being lured into marriage by Muslim men for conversion to Islam — a claim that has not been substantiated.

"We maintain that this is a serious issue and such forces are active across the country. An effort has been taken in Madhya Pradesh to stop them," Mishra added.

An equal number of Muslims and Christians have been arrested under the ordinance, according to [Matters India](#).

Among those arrested under the law is Chhatar Singh Katre, a teacher from a village in the Balaghat area, who had organized a prayer meeting on Jan. 27 to celebrate the admission of his daughter to college, the U.S.-based persecution watchdog [International Christian Concern](#) said.

Police arrived before the meeting began and arrested Katre and two other Christians, it said. All three were charged with violating the new anti-conversion law for luring and coercing people into changing their religion.

"My father organized the meeting for me and now he is in jail for no reason," Kalyani Katre, Katre's daughter, was quoted as saying. "The case was registered against him and two others on the complaint of a person who was booked 10 years ago for assaulting and harassing my father and others for participating in a religious program."

The ordinance replaces the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act of 1968, which presumes that Christian workers "force" or give financial benefits to Hindus to convert them to Christianity.

While these laws have been in place for decades in some states, no Christian has been convicted of "forcibly" converting anyone to Christianity. These laws, however, allow Hindu nationalist groups to make false charges against Christians and launch attacks on them under the pretext of the alleged forced conversion.

Similar anti-conversion laws have also been enacted in the states of Odisha, Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Jharkhand, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

Most recently, the northern state of Uttar Pradesh [approved an anti-conversion law](#) that experts warned would "incite more religiously motivated violence" as attacks on Christians and other religious minorities continue to escalate.

Some of these laws state that no one is allowed to use the “threat” of “divine displeasure,” meaning Christians cannot talk about Heaven or Hell, as that would be seen as “forcing” someone to convert. And if snacks or meals are served to Hindus after an evangelistic meeting, that could be seen as “inducement.”

The [ICC previously noted](#) that India’s own population data proves that the conspiracy of mass conversions to Christianity is a false claim. “In 1951, the first census after independence, Christians made up only 2.3% of India’s overall population. According to the 2011 census, the most recent census data available, Christians still only make up 2.3% of the population.”

Attacks and curbs on Christians have been on the rise since the BJP won India’s 2014 general election.

“Since the current ruling party took power in 2014, incidents against Christians have increased, and Hindu radicals often attack Christians with little to no consequences,” noted Open Doors’ [World Watch List](#) last year, which ranked India as the 10th worst country for Christians.

“The view of the Hindu nationalists is that to be Indian is to be Hindu, so any other faith — including Christianity — is viewed as non-Indian. Also, converts to Christianity from Hindu backgrounds or tribal religions are often extremely persecuted by their family members and communities,” Open Doors said at the time.

Last year, India [denied entry visas](#) to representatives of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom who had planned to investigate reports of persecution of Muslims and Christians following the release of its report that designates India as a “Country of Particular Concern.”

In a statement to The Christian Post, advocacy group The Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America said at the time it was “deeply disappointed” India did not receive the CPC designation in 2020.

“The national government allowed violence against minorities and their houses of worship to continue with impunity and engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence,” FIACONA said. “The Indian government headed by the Hindu nationalist BJP party continues to claim so conveniently that all such violence against Christians in India is isolated incidents and not the policy of the government.”

Anti-conversion law will be introduced in Gujarat soon, says CM Vijay Rupani

BJP-ruled states Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh have already introduced ordinances that criminalise interfaith marriage.

By Scroll Staff

Scroll.in (15.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3axi14m> - Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani on Sunday said that his government will soon introduce a law against religious conversion, PTI reported. Two other Bharatiya Janata Party-ruled states – Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh – have already introduced ordinances that criminalise interfaith marriage under the fig leaf of the Hindutva conspiracy theory, “love jihad”.

Rupani made the announcement at a rally for the municipal elections in Vadodara. "We are going to bring a law against love jihad in the Assembly," he said. "Such activities being done in the name of love jihad will not be tolerated. The BJP government will bring strict laws against love jihad in the coming days."

The Gujarat chief minister added that the government has also framed laws against anti-social elements and land grabbers, with a provision for up to 14 years of imprisonment. "We came up with the Land Grabbing (Prohibition) Act so that people do not enter others' land and take over their property using bogus documents," he added.

Meanwhile, BJP governments in some other states are also in the process of introducing laws aimed at preventing interfaith marriage. The [Haryana](#) government has formed a three-member drafting committee to frame a law on the matter. Karnataka and Assam governments have made similar announcements.

These developments happened even though the [Centre told the Lok Sabha](#) in 2019 that no "case of 'love jihad' has been reported by any of the central agencies".

The restrictions on interfaith marriage has drawn wide criticism. The Uttar Pradesh government's ordinance was challenged before the Allahabad High Court on the grounds that it violated privacy and individual freedom guaranteed under Article 21 of the Constitution.

On December 18, the High Court issued notices to the [Uttar Pradesh government](#), asking it to file counter affidavits to a batch of petitions challenging the law. The court, however, refused to grant interim relief in the form of a stay order.

Later, petitions were filed before the Supreme Court challenging the ordinance as well as a similar law enacted by Uttarakhand in 2018. Last month, the [Supreme Court](#) had agreed to examine the constitutional validity of anti-conversion laws enacted by Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, but refused to stay the controversial legislations in these states.

Persecution of Christians in India 'steadily worsening;' 3 pastors jailed on charges of forced conversion

By [Leah MarieAnn Klett](#)



A religious cross is captured through some ornamental railings in the Fort Kochi area in the state of Kerala in South India. | Getty Images

Christian Post (05.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3cHkf2w> - In India's Madhya Pradesh state, three Christian pastors were attacked by Hindu extremists and subsequently arrested and charged with violating the state's strict anti-conversion laws amid "worsening" religious persecution in the country.

Persecution watchdog International Christian Concern reports that on Jan. 27, six Christians, including Pastor Mahendra, Pastor Chatter Singh, and Pastor Nathan, gathered in a Christian home for a prayer meeting in Bagoli village.

Shortly after the meeting began, the Christians were attacked by about 30 radical Hindu nationalists who assaulted the believers and then dragged them to the local police station.

The three pastors were charged and arrested at the police station for violating Madhya Pradesh's new anti-conversion law. The three other Christians were released after local Christians intervened to rescue them.

The lower courts rejected bail petitions for the three pastors. Now, the issue is being appealed to the High Court.

"There is no relation between what happened in the village and the charges filed by police against the pastors," a local source who requested to remain anonymous told ICC. "Yet the pastors were denied bail which proves everyone involved in the case is complicit in sending the three pastors to jail."

ICC notes that after the government of Madhya Pradesh enacted the anti-conversion law last month, the state has seen a "new wave of anti-Christian incidents." Under the new

law, religious conversions must be approved by the state government and forced religious conversions are criminalized.

"The situation is like a cyclone hitting the state," Pastor Lanjwar, a local Christian leader, told ICC. "Most of the house churches in the rural areas are shut down due to fear of arrest or violent attack."

India's anti-conversion laws — currently in nine states, with more considering adoption — are often used by nationalists to justify harassment and assault of Christians. However, violence perpetrated against Christians is often overlooked by police due to false accusations of forced conversion.

John Prabhudoss, chairman of the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America, previously told The Christian Post that the victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014, and subsequent reelection in 2019, "brought about a sense of confidence among the Hindu radical party cadre that now they can attack Christians and other religious minorities with impunity and they do not have to worry about the law enforcement."

A pastor who has planted churches in India for several decades told CP that the situation for believers is "steadily worsening" in the country.

"The situation in India is very sensitive right now," he said, speaking under the condition of anonymity. "Many believers in India are facing very serious situations. [The government is] clamping down on the churches and passing new laws to incite hatred and anger against Christians. They feel threatened by us, and it's becoming increasingly difficult to be a Christian there. It's getting harder and harder to live faithfully as a Christian."

Still, the pastor emphasized that despite persecution, "the Body of Christ in India is strong" and "will remain faithful, even in the face of opposition."

India is ranked No. 10 on Open Doors USA's World Watch List of 50 countries where it's most difficult to be a believer. The organization notes that Hindu extremists believe that all Indians should be Hindus and that the country should be rid of Christianity and Islam.

As a result, Christians accused of following a "foreign faith" are often physically attacked and sometimes killed, as well as being under constant pressure from their family and community.

Jharkhand Tribal families beaten and fined on conversion charges

by Nirmala Carvalho

Bishop Paul Toppo: "It is true that few people convert by their own free will and conviction, however they must undergo a two-year training course and also provide a legal affidavit of their intention to embrace the Catholic faith, nonetheless there are many fabricated conversion charges".



AsiaNews (04.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3axoGKG> - Three Korwa tribal families in a Jharkhand village have been fined and beaten after a court with a sham trial declared them social outcasts for having recently converted to Christianity.

The incident took place in Khala village in the Dhurki block of Garhwa district on January 22, according to sources. Jaiwardhan Kumar, the local magistrate of Banshidhar Nagar, confirmed that he had received information on reactions against conversions in the area.

"Reports from some Khala villagers have come to my attention, but there is no official confirmation yet. I can't say more before an investigation into the matter is carried out," he said. The Korwa are officially classified as a particularly vulnerable tribal group. About two dozen families from the Scheduled Tribe and Scheduled Caste communities have converted to Christianity in the past year, villagers said.

The three Korwa families allegedly targeted for conversion were fined 25,051 rupees each (about 280 euros), as well as being flogged. Bishop Paul Toppo of the diocese of Raigarh Chhattisgarh told AsiaNews: "When Tribal peoples embrace Christianity, then they have to face humiliating consequences and social ostracising, and often economic deprivation, which is certainly inhuman. Tribal people are a communitarian people, so while I am not aware of this particular case- but anyone attending a prayer meeting is marked as being converted. I am a Tribal and my grandfather was a convert."

The bishops added: "I am proud to be a Tribal Christian. We take Christian Faith as a Blessing for our people. We are proud of Tribal and proud of being Christians. Faith has given us many things, firstly it brought us overall liberation. Faith has liberating us from many social evils like 'superstitions' and practices which were detrimental to our overall growth. We are proud of being Tribal Christians."

"The charges of forced conversions are baseless and fabricated," he continued. "There are many prayer services held, and when some elements see Tribals attending such

prayer meetings and services, they falsely assume that people are getting converted. It is true, that few people, get converted out of their own free will and their own conviction, but they have to undergo a two year RCIA and also give a legal affidavit of their intent to embrace the Catholic Faith', but there are many fabricated conversion allegations."

AsiaNews also spoke to Sajan K George, president of the Global Council of Indian Christians: "Systematic and targetted violence against Tribal Christians in Jharkhand and Chattisgarh is increasing in frequency and alarming violence. The right wing groups keep surveillance on any prayer meetings, their vigilante groups have almost become 'militant' and are ready to carry out attacks on the Christians tribal communities".

"In Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh - he added - the tribals their source livelihoods and even food security are under sustained attack, characterized by daily humiliation, harassment and discrimination. While the right wing extremists make baseless 'conversion charges, the local groups like the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad), routinely organize "Ghar Vapasi or home coming of the Tribals Christians in the district, to Hinduism, but Tribals were never Hindus, their ancestors were animists. The anti-conversion laws do not deem Ghar Vapasi as forced conversion. This is the sad interpretation of the secular nature of Indian society ".

Indian govt rules out national anti-conversion law

Christian leaders want all eight Indian states to repeal their anti-conversion laws to ensure religious freedom

UCA News – (03.02.2021) - <https://bit.ly/2N1Lt9q> - The Indian government, run by the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has ruled out the possibility of a nationwide law regulating religious conversions, bringing cheer to Christian leaders.

G. Kishan Reddy, a junior minister in the Ministry of Home Affairs, told parliament that the government plans no national law against conversions, ending speculation that Prime Minister Narendra Modi plans such a law targeting Christians and Muslims.

"Prosecution of offenses related to religious conversions is primarily the concerns of state governments and union (federal) territory administrations," Reddy told the national parliament on Feb. 2.

Christian leaders, who welcomed the assurance, also appealed to the government to repeal anti-conversion laws in eight states.

"Any anti-conversion law is against the constitution," said Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Pamplany, a member of the Office of the Doctrine of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI).

"Any law made against the spirit of the constitution cannot be justified. The constitution has guaranteed people to choose and practice whatever religion one wishes to," he told UCA News on Feb. 3.

The minister's statement came in response to questions from five parliamentarians from Kerala state in southern India who wanted to know if the government believed forced conversions were taking place in the country because of interfaith marriages.

They also sought to know if the government was planning any law to curb conversions by interfaith marriages.

Under the Indian constitution, "public order and police" are under each state's domain, the minister said. Therefore, "prevention, detection, registration, investigation and prosecution of offenses related to religious conversions are primarily the concerns of the state governments."

The demand for a nationwide anti-conversion law to regulate interfaith marriages came after governments in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh states, both run by the BJP, enacted separate anti-conversion laws to check religious conversion through interreligious marriages.

Bishop Pamplany said these laws were superfluous.

The governments are enacting anti-conversion laws under the pretext of checking conversion by allurement or force, but they actually target religious minorities, said Bishop Pamplany, who is also the chairman of the media commission of Kerala Catholic Bishops' Council (KCBC).

He said the Indian penal code has enough provisions to deal with allurement and force, "and there is no need for any special laws."

"The federal government is in the right direction in this announcement. It is in tune with the constitution, and the Church appreciates it," said the auxiliary bishop of Tellicherry Diocese in Kerala.

"We have come across gross misuse of anti-conversion laws in states where they exist. They are also deliberately used to target the minorities, including Christians and their institutions."

Bishop Pamplany wanted the federal government to take steps to repeal anti-conversion laws. "No doubt the federal government has done the right thing, and we appreciate it," he said.

Shibu Thomas, the founder of Persecution Relief, a forum that records Christian persecution in India, also appreciated the federal government announcement.

"We have been praying against such laws in the country, and God has heard our prayer," Thomas told UCA News on Feb. 3.

He said Christians want all eight Indian states to repeal their anti-conversion laws "to ensure that no one is deprived of their constitutional right to choose one's religion."

"We don't convert anyone as was being made out against us," Thomas asserted.

Photo: Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Pamplany said any anti-conversion law is against the constitution. (Photo: UCA News)

Destructive Lies: Open Doors publishes new LSE report on situation of religious minorities

Open Doors (07.01.2021) - Christians across India are living in constant fear as a systematic campaign of violent harassment, rape, and murder is waged against them. This is the finding of a shocking new report from the London School of Economics, commissioned by the Christian NGO Open Doors.

[Destructive Lies – Disinformation, speech that incites violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India](#) describes the extreme persecution Christians and Muslims are facing at the hands of violent vigilante mobs of Hindu nationalists. An executive summary is available [here](#).

According to the report, the attacks and persecution are ignored, and even condoned by state actors - including state and regional government, police, and media – to keep in favour with India's powerful Hindutva organisations.

A series of disturbing case studies are laid out in the report, including Sunita Verma**, who gave birth to a still-born baby after a *Hindutva* mob violently kicked her in the stomach, Ravi, a local labourer, entrapped and beaten by a mob and left to die in a cell by police, and the details of a mass attack on a Muslim village by a 6,000 strong mob, committing arson and driving many from their homes permanently.

According to one of the report's authors, who have asked not to be named: "The extent to which ... state actors are complicit in the violence is shocking; it was there even at the ground level. The bureaucrats, the police, the lower court judges, all of them are ...openly colluding to harass these minorities. And politicians, top religious leaders and powerful media owners [are giving] very overt signals that this [behaviour] is desirable."

During the current Covid-19 crisis, for example, Christians and Muslims have been targeted in concerted campaigns of misinformation, including claims that they are deliberately trying to spread the virus and infect Hindus through their acts of worship.

The research was conducted in February and March 2021 by an LSE research team based in India. The data was collected in localities where there had been reported incidents of anti-Christian or anti-Muslim violence. Further findings of the report include how attacks are filmed and posted on social media, how police and local legal infrastructures refuse to acknowledge any of the crimes committed or press charges and how state-level anti-conversion laws are encouraging violence and persecution.

The report makes a series of urgent recommendations, including an international fact-finding commission to record levels of violence and human rights violations against religious minorities. Meanwhile social media corporations are urged to take a series of immediate measures, including more moderators to address local issues of discrimination, harassment, and violence and immediate suspension of accounts spreading such materials.

** Names have been altered for safety reasons.

SC to examine state laws on religious conversion due to interfaith marriage

The Supreme Court agreed to examine controversial new laws of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand regulating religious conversions due to inter-faith marriages.

By Press Trust of India

Business Standard (06.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3ov9XFP> - The Supreme Court Wednesday agreed to examine controversial new laws of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand regulating religious conversions due to inter-faith marriages.

A bench headed by Chief Justice S A Bobde refused, however, to stay the controversial provisions of the laws and issued notices to both state governments on two different petitions.

The pleas, filed by advocate Vishal Thakre and others and an NGO Citizen for Justice and Peace', have challenged the constitutional validity of the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, 2020 and the Uttarakhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2018 which regulate religious conversions of inter-faith marriages.

At the outset, the top court asked the petitioners to approach the Allahabad High Court after Solicitor General Tushar Mehta said that it is already seized of the matter.

The bench said that this is not the transfer petition where it can transfer to itself all the cases on the law after one of the petitioner said that the issue should be examined by the top court.

Senior advocate C U Singh, appearing for the NGO, referred to the judgement of Justice (retired) Deepak Gupta and says that similar laws are being made in various states.

He sought stay of the provisions of the law and said that people are being in the middle of wedding ceremonies.

Singh added that some of the provisions of these laws are oppressive and horrible in nature and requires prior consent of government to marry which is absolutely obnoxious.

The bench said that it is issuing notice and sought response from both the state governments within four weeks.

When Singh insisted for stay of provisions, the CJI said that now stay is sought on some provisions without hearing the states.

How can it be done? the bench said.

India deals another blow to religious freedom

By Katey Hearth

MNN (05.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3bnyBVd> - India deals another blow to religious freedom as four states consider anti-conversion laws. More about that here. Police often

use anti-conversion rules to persecute Christians and other religious minorities, putting these groups at risk.

"[Another] state that has one in process is Maharashtra – a well-known state because of Mumbai, the economic and financial capital of India," John Pudaite of Bibles For The World says.

If state authorities pass the new legislation into law, "close to two-thirds of India's 1.3 billion people would now be under some anti-conversion law," Pudaite adds.

Why anti-conversion laws matter

India is one of the world's most challenging places to follow Christ, according to persecution watchdog groups like Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors.

Hindu radicals regularly persecute religious minorities. Plus, India's constitution allows for religious freedom, but authorities target Christian outreach using anti-conversion laws as a pretense.

It puts Bibles For The World partners in a precarious situation. "We're in touch with [our partners], urging them to continue their outreach but be careful, be cautious," Pudaite says.

"When we reach out in love and provide blankets, or clothing or food or things like that, [it] can easily be misconstrued by anti-Christians as 'Oh, they're enticing [people] with these material goods,'" he explains. More about Bibles For The World's ministry here.

"It's unfortunate because they don't understand – what our partners are offering is a relationship with Jesus Christ."

How to help

For believers in states with current or potential anti-conversion laws, pray for wisdom and discernment. Ask the Lord to protect believers in Uttar Pradesh, where police use a new anti-conversion law to arrest religious minorities.

"It was pushed through and signed by the governor of the state [even though] the legislature is not sitting right now; they're on vacation," Pudaite says.

"He is allowed to do that for a period of up to six months until the actual state legislature ratifies it."

Enacting the controversial 'love jihad' law was "very significant because [Uttar Pradesh] is the largest state in India. If it were an independent country, this state would be number six or seven in terms of population in the entire world," Pudaite continues.

"It has the strongest 'pro-Hindu' population, so it is a very significant battleground for religious freedoms."

First Christian arrested under new 'anti-conversion' law in U.P., India

South Korean jailed along with three other suspects.

Morning Star News (04.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/38DdY5i> - A Korean Christian and three nationals of India are in jail in Uttar Pradesh state, accused of fraudulent conversion attempts while distributing food and other aid to people in need due to COVID-19 lockdown, sources said.

Under a new "anti-conversion" law that went into effect in Uttar Pradesh state, India on Nov. 28, police arrested 50-year-old Mi Kyung Lee of Seoul, South Korea and the three others on Dec. 19 in Greater Noida, Gautam Buddha Nagar District, said the aid organizer, Raj Kumar Masih.

Masih has organized relief aid to thousands of people since obtaining permission from the Additional District Magistrate on March 23, setting up distribution centers in various areas and at his church site, he said. Among the beneficiaries were Anita Sharma and Muksi Gupta.

As Gupta knew who needed aid in her neighborhood, Masih sent two Indian nationals and their driver to her home to prepare a list of people to receive aid, with Lee accompanying them as she needed a lift to reach another location, Masih said. Gupta's next-door neighbor, Sharma, saw the four people leaving Gupta's house and reported to police that they had previously offered money to her and Gupta to convert to Christianity, Masih said.

Saying that not all of the four people arrested are even Christian, Masih denied that they offered anyone money to convert.

"We have proofs of our distribution and names and phone numbers of our beneficiaries, who can testify that we have not asked any of them to change their faith or religion," Masih told Morning Star News. "All beneficiaries were distributed ration kits, but none were promised any kind of money."

In her police complaint, Sharma alleged that the four had approached her and Gupta during lockdown and invited them to a Malakpur church to receive the free rations offered due to the pandemic. Thereafter, Sharma alleged, the four people began visiting their homes on Saturdays and Sundays, promising them money if they converted.

Sharma accused the four people of offering her and Gupta more rations if they removed pictures of Hindu idols from their homes and promising them 1 million rupees (US\$13,673) each if they converted to Christianity. She received 7,000 rupees (US\$95) and a month's ration, and Gupta received 3,000 rupees (US\$41) and a two-month ration, according to her complaint.

Lee, a friend of Masih, was visiting India when the onset of the pandemic obligated her to remain in the country, where she stayed with Korean friends. The other three suspects arrested were Umesh Kumar, the 30-year-old driver, and two women helping with the distribution, identified only as 25-year-old Seema, and 24-year-old Sandhya, who like Kumar is not Christian, Masih said.

"Seema visited Muksi Gupta's house to collect the names of the beneficiaries who would be given the relief," Masih said. "Muksi knows the people in her area well. The driver had taken Seema there, and Sandhya had accompanied her. It hardly took them five-seven minutes while Seema prepared the list, and when they left Gupta's home to leave, Anita Sharma the adjacent-door neighbor was watching all of this."

Based on Sharma's complaint, Surajpur police arrested the four people and registered the district's first case of the state's newly enacted Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance, aimed at checking illegal religious conversions.

Station Head Officer Pradeep Kumar Tripathi said police registered First Information Report (FIR) No. 0998, charging the four suspects with "deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs" under the Indian Penal Code. They are also charged under Section 3/5(1) of the newly enacted Uttar Pradesh law of "unlawful conversion from one religion to another by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means or by marriage."

The four suspects appeared in court on Dec. 20 and were sent to jail, and police confiscated the vehicle they were using, which belongs to Masih.

Saying the FIR was completely fabricated, Masih called the arrests a well-planned conspiracy of the Hindu nationalists.

"Nobody even bothered to ask the arrested their side of the story," Masih told Morning Star News. "What is shocking is that the driver, Umesh Kumar, and Sandhya are not even Christians. The local media have falsely reported them all to be Christians."

Sub-Inspector Ram Chandra Singh said the driver and the other two local suspects had all converted to Christianity long ago.

"I have done complete investigation, and it is all true," Singh told Morning Star News.

After the arrests, Hindu nationalist groups praised local police. The district branch of the Hindu extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Council of Hindus), along with a radical Hindu group known as the Karni Sena (Karni Army) and others visited and praised the station house officer and his team at the Surajpur police station on Dec. 21.

As of Dec. 28, police in Uttar Pradesh had registered 14 cases under the new law and made 51 arrests, of whom 49 were in jail. Of these, the alleged target of fraudulent conversion has filed a complaint in only two cases; the rest of the cases were filed by others, such as relatives.

The case in Noida, Gautam Buddha Nagar District, was the first case in Uttar Pradesh where Christians were accused. A second case happened the next day in Azamgarh, where three Christian men were arrested and sent to jail.

'Anti-conversion' law

Uttar Pradesh is the eighth state in India to enforce an anti-conversion law, commonly known as "freedom of religion" acts. Anti-conversion laws are in force in the states of Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand. The states of Arunachal Pradesh and Rajasthan have passed anti-conversion laws that are not in force for various reasons, and Tamil Nadu has passed and repealed its anti-conversion law.

The law was deemed necessary in Uttar Pradesh to counter so-called "Love Jihad," whereby Muslim men target Hindu women for marriage in order to convert them and reduce the number of Hindus in India. Madhya Pradesh and Haryana states have also declared intentions to enforce similar laws, with the Madhya Pradesh cabinet passing an ordinance on Dec. 26.

Uttar Pradesh's law, with prison terms of up to 10 years, lays the burden of proof on the person accused of having caused or facilitated fraudulent conversion.

The new law also requires those seeking to convert and those performing conversion ceremonies to submit intention to do so in advance to the district magistrate. Those seeking to change their religion must submit the declaration no less than 60 days in advance, while the person performing the ceremony is required to give a 30-day notice.

Violation of this section calls for imprisonment of six months to three years for the one converting and one to five years for the one performing the ceremony. Conviction would also make the conversion invalid and illegal under the law.

After receiving both declarations, the district magistrate must investigate the conversion to determine its intention, purpose and cause.

After conversion, within 60 days the convert must send a declaration on a prescribed form to the district magistrate, who will publicly display it on a notice board of his office. The declaration contains the convert's name, father's name, husband's name in the case of a married female convert, permanent address, present address, new and former religion, date and place of conversion, and the nature of the process for conversion.

Converts must appear before the district magistrate to verify their identity within 21 days of sending the declaration and confirm its contents. Violating these procedures will make the conversion illegal and void, under the law.

If a marriage takes place solely for the purpose of unlawful conversion or vice-versa, it would be declared void.

Fraudulent conversions of two or more persons are punishable by three to 10 years of prison and a fine of 50,000 rupees (US\$684) or more. Fraudulent conversion of a minor, woman, or person belonging to a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe is punishable by two to 10 years in prison and a fine of 25,000 rupees (US\$342) or more. Any other fraudulent conversion carries a prison term of one to five years and a fine of 15,000 rupees (US\$205) or more.

Under the law, each repeat conviction will attract double the punishment specified for the respective offense. All offenses under the law are non-bailable.

India ranked 10th on Christian support organization Open Doors' 2020 World Watch List of the countries where it is most difficult to be a Christian. The country was 31st in 2013, but its position has been worse each year since Narendra Modi of the Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in 2014.

3 states, 3 anti-conversion laws: what's similar, what's different

While a common feature of all three laws is the declaration of such marriages as "null and void" and the penalising of conversions done without the prior approval of the state, they differ in the quantum of punishment prescribed and other things.

By Apurva Vishwanath

The Indian Express (03.01.2021) - <https://bit.ly/3nGX4Y2> - The Madhya Pradesh government is set to follow two other BJP-ruled states — Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh — in passing an anti-conversion law that outlaws religious conversion solely for the purpose of marriage. The MP Cabinet has approved the Freedom to Religion Bill, 2020 as an Ordinance.

While a common feature of all three laws is the declaration of such marriages as “null and void” and the penalising of conversions done without the prior approval of the state, they differ in the quantum of punishment prescribed, and in attributing the burden of proof that a conversion is lawful. Also, the MP law seeks to protect the rights of women of such marriages.

Prior notice

The MP law requires a 60-day prior “declaration of the intention to convert” to the District Magistrate for conversion to be valid, following which a couple from different religions can be legally married.

The Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religious Ordinance, 2020 promulgated in November, too requires a 60-day notice but also requires the Magistrate to conduct a police inquiry to ascertain the real intention behind the conversion.

The Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 2019 that came into effect last week, requires a 30-day prior “declaration of intention to convert”.

Who can investigate

Section 4 of the MP law states that there cannot be an investigation by a police officer except on the written complaint of the person converted or the person’s parents/siblings. Guardians of the person converted can file a complaint only with the permission of a court. The MP law also says that no police officer below the rank of a sub-inspector can investigate an offence under the law.

The Himachal law says that prosecution cannot be initiated without the prior sanction of an officer not below the rank of a sub-divisional magistrate.

The UP law allows the same people as allowed by the MP law to file a complaint.

Burden of proof

The MP law places on the person converted the burden of proving that the conversion was done without any coercion or illegality. The Himachal law has a similar provision. The UP law goes further, placing this burden of proof on people who “caused” or “facilitated” the conversion and not on the individual. Even in the police inquiry, if the Magistrate is not satisfied, criminal action under Section 11 of the Ordinance can be initiated against persons who “caused” the conversion. This includes those who committed the offence; omitted to act and prevent the offence; and aided, abetted, counselled or procured people for committing the offence.

Maintenance & inheritance

While declaring as “null and void” any marriage in which either the husband or the wife has converted, even consensual, unless they have given prior notice to the state government, MP’s new law at the same time seeks to protect the right of women and her child from the “null and void” marriage. Under Section 9, the woman whose marriage has been declared null and void under this legislation, and her children, will have a right to

maintenance. The law does not, however, provide a recourse for ensuring the marriage can be protected subsequently.

Neither the UP nor the Himachal law has such provisions.

Quantum of punishment

The offence of illegal conversion under the laws of all three states is cognisable and non-bailable, which means an arrest can be made without a warrant and bail is granted only by the discretion of the judge.

Under the MP law, a person can be sentenced to a jail term between one and five years for converting or attempting to convert unlawfully. If the person converted is a woman, a minor or a person belonging to a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST), the sentence is two to 10 years. It also provides for a jail term of three to 10 years for concealing one's religion during the marriage.

The UP law provides for a minimum punishment of one year, which can be extended up to five years, and repeat offences can carry double the maximum sentence. Men are awarded a higher punishment if convicted of causing conversion of a woman, a minor or a person belonging to an SC/ST — in which case the sentence is between two and 10 years.

In the Himachal law, a person can be sentenced to a jail term of one to five years for converting or attempting to convert unlawfully. If the person converted is a woman, a minor or a person belonging to an SC/ST, the sentence is two to seven years.

The laws earlier

At least 10 states including MP and Himachal Pradesh already have anti-conversion laws. The key difference in the new laws is that they seek to criminalise conversions solely for the purpose of marriage.

The MP Ordinance repeals the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 1968. While that too criminalised forced conversion, the new law adds provisions relating to conversion during marriage, maintenance rights, and reversal of the burden of proof by placing it on the accused.

Himachal passed its law in 2019, repealing the Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 2006. While the 2019 law has added provisions related to conversions for the purpose of marriage, the aspect of prior declaration before the district magistrate existed in the 2006 law as well. Incidentally, the High Court had struck down the prior notice provisions as unconstitutional and violative of the fundamental right to privacy.

In 2019, a report by the UP State Law Commission recommended a special law to address incidents of forced conversion. In a draft Bill, submitted along with the report, the Commission recommended penalising fraudulent conversions, including conversions solely for the purpose of marriage. The Ordinance was promulgated subsequently.