

Table of Contents

- ***Christians wary as Indian state outlaws conversion***
 - ***761 acts of violence committed against Indian Christians in 2021, new report finds***
 - ***A Protestant Christian pastor killed in Chhattisgarh***
 - ***Persecution of Christians and religious minorities: Report***
 - ***Indian group asks bishops to take stand on anti-Christian violence***
 - ***2021 "the most violent year" for Christians in India***
-

Christians wary as Indian state outlaws conversion

Archbishop Peter Machado of Bangalore says he will disclose stance on Karnataka's latest anti-conversion law in court

UCA News (16.09.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3BtPoBI> - Archbishop Peter Machado of Bangalore had a guarded response a day after the provincial government in India's southern state of Karnataka gave its final seal of approval to a law criminalizing religious conversions.

The state's Legislative Council or upper house passed the contentious Karnataka Right to Freedom of Religion Bill with a majority vote on Sept. 15.

The anti-conversion law was already in force after the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which rules the state, promulgated an ordinance on May 17 with the signature of the state governor after it failed to muster enough support in the Legislative Council, whose final sanction is a must for any law to come into force.

The law was passed by the state Legislative Assembly last December but the BJP was one seat short of a majority in the 75-member upper house. Having mustered up enough numbers now, it went ahead in what is perceived as a well-planned political strategy.

The ordinance now stands repealed or canceled with the passage of the bill within six months of the governor issuing it, as required under the Indian Constitution.

The opposition Congress and Janata Dal (People's Front) parties, however, called the move "unconstitutional."

When contacted by UCA News on Sept. 16, Bishop Machado said he had already challenged the ordinance in the state's high court and refused to make further comments on the new law.

The prelate said he would disclose his position before the court rather than make it public through the media.

Archbishop Machado, who heads the regional bishops' forum, has been one of the fiercest critics of anti-conversion laws in the country.

"The Christian community feels betrayed when its sentiments are not taken note of. Its selfless services in the fields of education, healthcare and other social areas for the welfare of all communities are not taken into consideration," he had said in a statement on May 18, a day after the Karnataka government promulgated the ordinance.

He had repeatedly drawn the attention of the BJP government and people of the state that the law was "irrelevant and malicious" and "aimed at dividing the Christians from other religious minorities."

Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai said there is no intention to take away anybody's right to practice and propagate one's religion as is being made out.

"If there have to be conversions then let them be as per a law and that is the intention behind this bill," he added.

Home Minister Araga Jnanendra, who introduced the bill in the upper house, dismissed the concerns of Christians by saying "there is freedom to convert but not under coercion or allurement."

The new law prescribes imprisonment of three to five years along with a fine ranging from Indian rupees 25,000 to 100,000 (US\$330-1,330) in case of conversion due to "force, undue influence, coercion, allurement or by any fraudulent means" or "by a promise of marriage."

Anyone wanting to change religion will have to file a declaration before designated government authorities at least 30 days in advance, citing the reasons for the decision.

On the issue of interfaith marriages, the law states that "any marriage which has happened with the sole purpose of unlawful conversion or vice-versa by the man of one religion with the woman of another religion either by converting himself before or after marriage or by converting the woman before or after marriage shall be declared as null and void."

Christians in Karnataka state say Hindu groups have been aggressively targeting them since the pro- Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in the state in 2018.

"They attack our Churches, social institutions and the faithful by creating a false impression that Christians are illegally converting poor people," said a Church official who did not want to be named.

Christians make up 1.87 percent of Karnataka's 61 million people, according to the 2011 census.

Photo: Christians participate in a special 'Prayer for our Country' to celebrate Republic Day at the Union Chapel in Kolkata on January 26, 2020. (Photo: AFP/ UCAN files)

761 acts of violence committed against Indian Christians in 2021, new report finds

By Anugrah Kumar

The Christian Post (09.04.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3jwAyS3> - A federation of Indian American Christian groups says it documented at least 761 incidents of violence against Christians, including lynching and armed assaults last year. It is recommended that the U.S. and European governments impose sanctions on officials who promote violence and exclusion of religious minorities.

"The year 2021 has proven to be the most violent year for Christians in India," said John Prabhudoss, the chairman of the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America, at a [press conference](#) in Washington, D.C., this week.

Prabhudoss said FIACONA documented and analyzed all the 761 incidents, adding that the number of anti-Christian attacks is likely to be much higher because most of the incidents are not reported.

Christians and other minorities, he explained, do not trust the police, especially in rural areas. "The current hostile environment in India amplifies that distrust."

Prabhudoss added that a survey by FIACONA in states where the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party is governing showed that 72% of Christians believe that the police will not protect their lives, liberty, property or their way of life.

The [report](#) by FIACONA said India's judiciary is also not viewed as being independent and impartial.

"The higher courts in India have been passing judgments favoring views of the political establishments rather than based on legal merits of the cases," it stated. "Many recent judgments have made some wonder if the integrity of the high courts is compromised."

It adds, "Common citizens of India, especially the religious minorities, observe and feel that the governments led by BJP are implementing the majoritarian ideology, namely 'Hindutva.'"

The government, it continued, "is subservient to" the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an umbrella Hindu nationalist group, and its "multiple associates specializing in radical and violent means to exclude and demean the Christians."

FIACONA also accused some media outlets and social media giants of being aligned with Hindu nationalists that are inciting attacks on religious minorities and calling for genocide.

"Most major media houses both in print and TV are either controlled or owned by tycoons who are in league with the Hindu nationalist ecosystem," it said. "And it is more visible in

Hindi and some other vernacular media. It has been confirmed that even social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter in India are manipulated by the radical Hindu sympathizers.”

A Hindu nationalist-leaning religious conclave, called Dharma Sansad, held in the city of Haridwar in the northern state of Uttarakhand from Dec. 17–19, 2021, called for genocide of religious minorities, the report noted, adding that another call for genocide was made by a different Hindu nationalist group in the southern state of Karnataka on Feb. 25.

The FIACONA report also noted that India’s “anti-conversion” laws are used as a tool to arrest religious minorities, including Christians, on false charges of forced conversions.

The anti-conversion laws presume that Christians pressure Hindus to convert to Christianity. Some of these laws have been in place for decades in some states. Radical Hindu nationalist groups frequently use the laws to make false charges against Christians and launch attacks on them under the pretext that they're enticing people to convert with the promise of food gifts.

Under these laws, Christians are also prohibited from talking about the afterlife.

The report further noted that Overseas Friends of BJP USA, which is a registered outfit in the U.S. as a foreign agent under FARA regulations, is also an offshoot of the RSS “to provide a much needed support mechanism for their activities in India.”

“We recommend that India-based non-state actors and key officials that promote violence and exclusion of religious minorities from the society be identified and sanctioned by the United States and European governments,” it said.

Another [report](#) released by the United Christian Forum in India earlier this year recorded at least 486 violent incidents of Christian persecution in 2021.

The UCF also attributed the high incidence of Christian persecution to “impunity,” due to which “such mobs criminally threaten, physically assault people in prayer, before handing them over to the police on allegations of forcible conversions.”

Police registered formal complaints in only 34 of the 486 cases, according to the UCF. “Often communal sloganeering is witnessed outside police stations, where the police stand as mute spectators,” the UCF report stated.

“Hindu extremists believe that all Indians should be Hindus and that the country should be rid of Christianity and Islam,” an Open Doors fact sheet explains. “They use extensive violence to achieve this goal, particularly targeting Christians from a Hindu background. Christians are accused of following a ‘foreign faith’ and blamed for bad luck in their communities.”

The U.S.-based persecution watchdog International Christian Concern earlier [warned](#) that “the pace of Christian persecution only seems to be accelerating with the arrival of 2022,” and “whether 2022 will be as violent of a year as 2021 is yet to be seen.”

Christians make up only 2.3% of India’s population and Hindus comprise about 80%.

Photo: Getty Images

A Protestant Christian pastor killed in Chhattisgarh

Agenzia Fides (28/03/2022) - <https://bit.ly/3tS0IK9> - A 50-year-old Protestant Christian Pastor was murdered by a group of masked men in the district of Bijapur, in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh. The episode of violence, which took place on March 17, has only now been confirmed to Agenzia Fides. According to sources in the local Christian community, Pastor Yallam Shankar was having dinner at his home, around 7:00 pm on March 17, when a crowd of militants forced entry, dragged him out and stabbed him with a sharp weapon.

The attack took place while the Hindu festival of "Holika Dahan" (a festival that celebrates the victory of good over evil) was being celebrated in the village of Angampalli, where pastor Shankar lived.

Before starting to lead the small local Christian community, Pastor Shankar had served as head of the village council, where he had distinguished himself as an advocate for the rights of Christian minorities and helped those who suffered abuses and violations of rights to seek justice. Because of this commitment, Pastor Shankar had received several life threats, as well as the request, always rejected, to abandon Christianity and accept conversion to Hinduism.

On March 18, the day after the lynching, a report was registered at the Madded Police Station, a necessary step for the police to begin an investigation. For now, the police have not released any official communiqué, however there are several theories on the reason for the murder of the Pastor.

According to reports to Fides, a leaflet was found at the crime scene that seems to link the murder to the People's Liberation Guerrilla Army (PLGA), a Maoist armed group that rages in the area. The leaflet accuses Pastor Shankar of being a police informant and announces the murder because he did not heed the warnings from the PLGA.

The police, however, deny that Shankar was an informant and are examining the hypothesis of the misdirection. On the other hand, the local clergy and members of the Christian community in the area believe that, despite the note, it is not clear whether the attack was really carried out by Maoists or whether other elements with ideas that promote violence against Christians are involved.

In a statement sent to Fides, the organization "Christian Solidarity Worldwide", which monitors violence against Christians in the world, states: "Yallam Shankar was a man who served his village defending the rights of minorities and defending justice. Chhattisgarh is increasingly becoming a breeding ground for targeted attacks against Christians and the authorities' efforts to stop this violence have so far proved insufficient. We urge the authorities in Chhattisgarh to conduct a swift and thorough investigation into this murder and to bring the perpetrators to justice for their actions". According to data collected by the "United Christian Forum" "in 2021 almost 500 cases of anti-Christian violence were reported in India", recalls to Fides A.C. Michael, Catholic lay leader and UCF coordinator.

According to Michael, this is the tip of the iceberg, because "numerous cases of attacks against Christians are not reported and are not documented". (PA) (Agenzia Fides, 28/3/2022)

Photo : Pastor Yalam Sankar. (Credit: Sankar family.)

Persecution of Christians and religious minorities: [Report](#)

UK Parliament (22.02.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3smM6fV> - India is a multi-faith democracy, with a majority Hindu population. According to [2011 census data](#), 79.80% of the population of India is Hindu, 14.23% Muslim, 2.30% Christian, 1.72% Sikh, 0.70% Buddhist, and 0.37% Jain.

India's [constitution](#) defines the nation as secular and protects freedom of religion or belief. However, there are concerns that religious minorities and other minority groups are suffering from persecution and discrimination, and that conditions have [deteriorated](#) in recent years.

Human rights groups have criticised the Government, which has been led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2014, for not doing enough to protect minorities. Human Rights Watch, in its [2019 report on India](#) claimed that "the government failed to properly enforce Supreme Court directives to prevent and investigate mob attacks, often led by BJP supporters, on religious minorities and other vulnerable communities".

Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, who has led the BJP Government since it came to power, has defended its record on religious freedom. Mr Modi in an address to the US Congress in 2016, [said](#): "For my government, the Constitution is its real holy book. And, in that holy book, freedom of faith, speech and franchise, and equality of all citizens, regardless of background, are enshrined as fundamental rights."

Citizenship Amendment Act and violence against Muslims

India's Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed by its Parliament in December 2019, has been a particular cause for concern for those worried about religious freedom in the country. [BBC News outlined the purpose and effects of the law](#): "The act offers amnesty to non-Muslim illegal immigrants from three countries – Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan."

It amends India's 64-year-old citizenship law, which currently prohibits illegal migrants from becoming Indian citizens.

It also expedites the path to Indian citizenship for members of six religious minority communities – Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi and Christian – if they can prove that they are from Muslim-majority Pakistan, Afghanistan or Bangladesh. They will now only have to live or work in India for six years – instead of 11 years – before becoming eligible to apply for citizenship.

The government says this will give sanctuary to people fleeing religious persecution, but critics argue that it will marginalise India's Muslim minority.

In a press release, Amnesty International [stated](#) that the law “legitimises discrimination on the basis of religion and stands in clear violation of both the constitution of India and international human rights law”.

That same month as protests against the law [sparked violent clashes](#), the Indian Prime Minister [defended the law](#) saying “we passed this bill to help the persecuted”. Mr Modi said the law would have “no effect on citizens of India, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Buddhists”. He also blamed the opposition for the protests, accusing them of “spreading lies and rumours” and “instigating violence” and “creating an atmosphere of illusion and falsehood”.

Violence against Muslims

Other causes for concern for India’s Muslims include [mob violence against Muslims](#) accused of [killing cows](#), animals that are sacred to Hindus.

Human Rights Watch’s [report on human rights in India in 2021](#) stated: “Hindu mobs beat up Muslims, often working class men, with impunity while pro-BJP supporters filed baseless complaints against critics, especially religious minorities.”

In January, a Muslim stand-up comic, Munawar Faruqui, and five of his associates were arrested on a complaint brought by the son of a BJP politician who accused him of hurting Hindu sentiments in jokes Faruqui apparently did not utter. Police subsequently admitted they had no evidence of the performance.

Discrimination against Christians and anti-conversion laws

According to a 2018 [briefing by the Library of Congress](#), eight out of India’s twenty-nine states have Freedom of Religion Acts often called “anti-conversion” laws, that regulate religious conversions. These laws are seen to in particular target Christian groups. However, it is [reported that](#) there have been very few arrests or prosecutions under these laws.

According to the [United States Commission on International Religious Freedom](#) (USCIRF) an independent U.S. federal government commission that reports on religious freedom, the right to proselytize is protected alongside freedom of religion or belief in India’s constitution. However, religious freedom is “subject to public order”, a “vague phrase allowing the suspension of rights to protect social ‘tranquillity’”.

In its [2021 report](#) (pdf) the USCIRF stated that “these anti-conversion laws are too often the basis for false accusations, harassment, and violence against non-Hindus that occur with impunity”. In 2020, the Commission detailed that [M]obs—fuelled by false accusations of forced conversions—attacked Christians, destroyed churches, and disrupted religious worship services. In many cases, authorities did not prevent these abuses and ignored or chose not to investigate pleas to hold perpetrators accountable.

Case of Stan Swamy

The case of Stan Swamy, an 83-year-old Jesuit Priest and human rights activist in India who died in custody in 2021 while awaiting trial on counter-terrorism charges, has been held up as an example of discrimination against India’s religious minorities. Nadine

Maenza, chair of USCIRF, [stated that](#) "Father Stan Swamy's death is a stark reminder of the egregious and ongoing persecution of India's religious minority communities".

Stan Swamy was first [arrested on 8 October 2020](#), on the outskirts of Ranchi, the capital city of the eastern state of Jharkhand in India. The arrest and investigation were led by the National Investigation Agency (NIA), India's counterterrorism enforcement agency, who stated that he was arrested in connection to a [2018 incident of caste-based violence](#) and alleged links with Maoist rebels. The priest was transferred to Mumbai, where he was imprisoned reportedly under the [Unlawful Activities \(Prevention\) Act](#).

Stan Swamy [was denied bail](#), and there were [concerns over his treatment in prison](#). He died in July 2021. His death brought criticisms from opposition politicians and human rights organisations. Leader of the main opposition Congress party [Rahul Gandhi tweeted](#) that Swamy "deserved justice and humaneness". United Nations Special Rapporteur Mary [Lawlor said she was devastated to hear about his death](#) and that "jailing HRDs [Human rights defenders] is inexcusable":

The [Indian government said](#) Swamy's arrest followed "due process under law", and that his bail had been denied because of the "specific nature of charges against him". It added in [a statement](#) that "Authorities in India act against violations of law and not against legitimate exercise of rights. All such actions are strictly in accordance with the law".

Photo : A controversial citizenship law has set off protests across India - AFP

Indian group asks bishops to take stand on anti-Christian violence

By Nirmala Carvalho

Crux Now (21.01.2022)- <https://bit.ly/3FX8iR5> - A group of religious sisters and brothers in India is calling on the country's Catholic bishops to make their voices heard as Christians and other religious minorities are attacked in India.

In a letter to Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, the president of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace noted individuals and civil society groups have register their protest against "the gross violation of our rights" by signing petitions, but added that "what is missing is the voice of the official church, the CBCI."

"During the two days, December 24-25, the media reported 7 well-planned attacks on Christian Institutions across the country. In fact, in the year 2021, there were 486 incidents of violence against the Christian community in India, according to the United Christian Front. What shocks us is the complete silence on the part of the official Church, the CBCI," the letter says.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has ruled India since 2014. The BJP is linked with the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist group.

Hindu nationalists often accuse Christians of using force and surreptitious tactics in pursuing conversions, often storming into villages and leading "reconversion" ceremonies in which Christians are compelled to perform Hindu rituals.

These pressures on Christians, which also affect Muslims and other religious minorities, are part of what observers describe as a broad program for the "saffronization" of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, meaning an attempt to impose Hindu values and identity while squeezing out rival faiths.

"The violent acts against the Christian community and Muslim community or any other minority group are in complete violation of the law of the land and the Indian Constitution. If we do not respond to such acts, the secular fabric of India will be lost causing irreparable damage to the people of India, and an inclusive, democratic and pluralistic India as envisioned in the preamble of the Indian Constitution could be lost forever," said the letter from the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace.

In the missive, the religious request that Gracias "guide the Catholic Community of India to respond to the increasing hate speech and violence against Muslims and Christians."

"We are of the view that we Catholics cannot remain silent spectators when the drama of violent attacks against the minorities is unfolding before us. We need to act and fulfill our prophetic role before it is too late," the document continues.

In the letter, the forum makes several requests of the cardinal:

1. Sending a letter to the Indian Prime Minister and the Union Home Minister [who is in charge of law enforcement] asking them to give strict orders to the chief ministers of the states where atrocities against Christians are taking place, to prevent such atrocities in future and to bring to book the culprits who are involved in these crimes;
2. Have prominent Christian leaders under the leadership of the Chairman of the Regional Bishops Conference submit a memorandum to the chief ministers of states where violent incidents against Christian community are taking place asking them to take strict measures to prevent such incidents and file cases against those are involved in inciting violence against Christians;
3. Have the CBCI respond immediately after any harassment or attacks on Christian institutions and Church personnel by the agencies of the state or by the right-wing groups take place;
4. Create a legal advisory committee under the CBCI to provide legal guidance and support to the victims of violence or harassment to approach the competent courts;
5. Organize a day of fasting at the Indian state capitals under the leadership of all the bishops of the region to protest against the increasing violence against minorities;
6. Plan strategies to prevent as well as manage crises at the diocesan level, regional level and the national level;
7. Organize united action against the attacks through protests, closure of the Christian educational institutes, common prayers, and other such initiatives.

Presentation Sister Dorothy Fernandes said the letter was sent to Gracias because "the sporadic and well-planned actions" taking place around the Christmas holiday made the Forum of Religious for Justice and Peace feel the need to call on "the leadership of our Church to wake up."

"People of different walks are asking us why we are silent?" Fernandes told *Crux*.

"We have also suggested a number of doable actions which is inclusive and will sustain the secular fabric of our beautiful nation. We would believe that our inclusiveness will

reach out to the Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, Tribals, women and children. This is our prophetic calling, and we can no longer afford to sit on the fence and wait till they come for us," she said.

"We shall not remain silent but will pursue the matter till we move the hierarchical Church to become action oriented," Fernandes added.

Photo : Women pray for deceased relatives during the feast of All Souls at a graveyard in Mumbai, India, Nov. 2, 2021. (Credit: Francis Mascarenhas/Reuters via CNS.)

2021 "the most violent year" for Christians in India

Agenzia Fides (04.01.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3JU2nzo>- The year 2021 ended as the most violent year in history for Christians in India, recording 486 episodes of violence and hatred that shook the country. The Christian minority of the Indian population has faced attacks on many occasions by Hindu extremist groups throughout the country. The increase, year after year, in violence against a completely peaceful community came in the last quarter of 2021 reached alarming numbers. "The complaints presented reveal that there was more than one attack per day, reaching a total of almost 500 cases of violence in 2021, according to the United Christian Forum (UCF)", explains to Fides A.C. Michael, Catholic lay leader and UCF coordinator.

In the last three months of 2021 there were more than 180 incidents involving Christians shortly before Christmas. The monthly number of cases of violence was 37 in January, 20 in February, 27 in March, 27 in April, 15 in May, 27 in June, 33 in July, 50 in August, 69 in September, 77 in October, 56 in November and 48 in December.

"The climate of hatred that spreads through certain actions and speeches by some groups and the false propaganda about alleged fraudulent conversions seem to incite antisocial elements to carry out violent acts. The enactment of laws in the name of freedom of religion exacerbates the situation. It would not be an exaggeration to say that these events are well-orchestrated and planned acts by some groups with the aim of dividing the country based on religious issues", observes A.C. Michael in his conversation with Fides. According to reports in the toll-free number launched by the UCF group, episodes of violence against Christians have been increasing sharply since 2014. They recorded 127 incidents in 2014; 142 in 2015; 226 in 2016; 248 in 2017; 292 in 2018; 328 in 2019; 279 in 2020; and, finally, 486 accidents as of December 30, 2021.

Overall, four states in northern India, Uttar Pradesh (102), Chhattisgarh (90), Jharkhand (44), and Madhya Pradesh (38) recorded 274 incidents of violence against Christians in 2021.

"Christians note that such states do not guarantee a favorable atmosphere for all citizens equally", notes Michael, a former member of the Delhi Minority Commission.

Even in a southern state, Karnataka, there is a high number of episodes of violence against Christians in 2021, a total of 59 episodes. Other states where there is violence against Christians are Bihar (29 cases), Tamil Nadu (20), Odisha (20), Maharashtra (17),

Haryana (12), Punjab (10), Andhra Pradesh (9), Gujarat (7), Uttarakhand (8), Delhi (8), Telangana (3), Himachal Pradesh (3), West Bengal (2), Rajasthan (2), Assam (1) and Jammu and Kashmir (1 case). The toll-free number of the UCF, through the work of its lawyers, managed to obtain the release of 210 detainees. In addition, 46 places of worship were reopened and permission for religious ceremonies to continue to have prayer services. However, only 34 official complaints (First Information Report) against violent perpetrators were filed with the police.

In nearly all reported incidents across India, "vigilante" groups made up of religious extremists raided prayer meetings or religious ceremonies. They use their impunity to physically assault people in prayer, before handing them over to the police on charges of forced conversions. We often see anti-Christian slogans outside police stations, while the police do not intervene. Violence against the Christian community is aggravated by the inability or lack of commitment of the police to investigate and prosecute the perpetrators. This is the case despite indications from the Supreme Court of India which has repeatedly called for these heinous acts of group violence to be stopped.

As many as 19 appeals are pending in various Indian courts, filed under the "Freedom of Religion Act" in nine states of India where such laws exist. Although such laws have been in place in some states since 1967 - for over 50 years - until today, no Christian has been convicted of forcing someone to convert. Furthermore, census after census, the Christian population remained 2.3% of India's 1.3 billion population (2019).

The UCF toll-free number was launched on January 19, 2015, to support India's fundamental freedom and the promotion of values such as justice, freedom, equality and brotherhood. The helpline helps people in need, especially those unfamiliar with the laws of the country, by guiding them on how to deal with public authorities.

Photo : Agenzia Fides