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Serious concerns raised at UN rights review

Member States seek protection of minority rights, free speech, peaceful assembly

Human Rights Watch (18.11.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3Ost80S> - The [Indian](#) government should promptly adopt and act on the recommendations that United Nations member states made at the UN Human Rights Council's [Universal Periodic Review process](#) on November 10, 2022, six international human rights groups said today. The recommendations cover a range of key concerns including the protection of minority communities and vulnerable groups, tackling gender-based violence, upholding civil society freedoms, protecting human rights defenders, and ending torture in custody.

The groups are the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), World Organisation Against Torture (OMCT), CSW, International Dalit Solidarity Network, Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch.

All UN member states participate in the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) process, which examines their human rights record and proposes action to improve the human rights situations in their countries. In its [report](#) submitted to the UN ahead of its review, the Indian government claimed "it is firmly committed to the promotion and protection of human rights." However, in the past UPR cycles, India has ignored important recommendations, including to address increasing violence against religious minorities, ensure accountability of its security forces, and protect freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

During the periodic review, India's fourth, 130 member states made 339 recommendations highlighting some of the most urgent human rights concerns in the country.

Since its [last review in 2017](#), India has undergone a [serious regression in human rights](#) under the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The government has escalated its crackdown on independent and democratic institutions, and is using draconian counterterrorism and national security laws to prosecute and harass human rights activists, journalists, students, government critics, and peaceful protesters. Attacks, discrimination, and incitement against religious minorities are increasing. The traditionally marginalized Dalit and Adivasi communities have been denied justice and equitable protection.

At least 21 countries urged India to improve its protection of freedom of religion and rights of religious minorities, with several raising concerns over increasing violence and hate speech and the government's adoption of discriminatory policies such as "anti-conversion" laws.

Since Modi's BJP came to power in 2014, it has taken various legislative and other actions that have made it lawful to discriminate against religious minorities, particularly Muslims, and enabled violent Hindu majoritarianism, the groups said.

The government passed a [citizenship law](#) in December 2019 that discriminates against Muslims, for the first time making religion the basis for citizenship. In August 2019, the government [revoked the constitutional autonomy](#) granted to the only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir, and [continues to restrict free expression](#), peaceful assembly, and other basic rights in the region. Since October 2018, Indian authorities have [deported at least 13 Rohingya Muslim refugees to Myanmar](#) despite the risks to their lives and security.

Indian states have used [laws against cow slaughter](#) to prosecute Muslim cattle traders even as BJP-affiliated groups attack Muslims and Dalits on rumors that they killed or traded cows for beef. At least 10 Indian states forbid forced religious conversion, but they [misuse the laws to target Christians](#). States also enforce these laws to [harass and arrest Muslim men](#) in relationships with Hindu women. Throughout 2022, authorities in several BJP-ruled states [demolished Muslim homes and properties without legal authorization](#) or due process, either as summary or collective punishment, holding them responsible for the violence during the communal clashes.

Twenty countries said that India should improve protection of freedom of expression and assembly, and create an enabling environment for civil society groups, human rights defenders, and media to do their work. Some of these countries expressed concerns over the use of the counterterrorism law, the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), against activists, journalists, and members of religious minority communities. Over the years, rights groups and [several UN human rights experts](#) have raised concerns over the use of this law, which is widely criticized for failing to conform to international human rights standards, to detain activists and others for exercising their basic rights of freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.

A number of countries raised concerns over the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), the law used to regulate foreign funding for nongovernmental organizations, and asked the government to review or amend the law to bring it line with international human rights standards.

The Indian authorities have used the law to [shut down foreign funding for thousands of civil society groups](#), particularly those that work on human rights or the rights of vulnerable communities. Several UN bodies have warned that the law is being used to silence dissent. In October 2020, then-UN High Commissioner for Human Rights [Michelle](#)

[Bachelet said](#) that the act is “indeed actually being used to deter or punish NGOs for human rights reporting and advocacy that the authorities perceive as critical in nature.” Nineteen countries said that India should ratify the UN Convention against Torture, a treaty it signed in 1997 but never ratified. India said in both 2012 and 2017 UPR cycles that it remained committed to ratifying the treaty. But it hasn’t taken steps to fulfill its commitment even as [torture and other ill-treatment continue to be used routinely](#) by police and other security forces to gather information or coerce confessions.

Countries also urged India to address caste-based discrimination; strengthen efforts aimed at alleviating poverty, improving access to health care, safe drinking water, and sanitation, and providing access to free and quality education for all children; ensure a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment; and strengthen protections for children, women, and persons with disabilities.

The Indian government has [said](#) that the “UPR is an important mechanism that India fully supports” and “as the world’s largest democracy, India is committed to the highest standards of human rights.”

The Indian government needs to follow up on the concerns raised by other member states at the UPR, which are shared widely by rights groups and several UN bodies, and take immediate steps to correct course and protect the rights and dignity of all people, the groups said.

Photo: Delegates attend the opening day of the 50th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council, in Geneva, June 13, 2022. © 2022 Keystone/Valentin Flauraud

30 pastors incarcerated in Uttar Pradesh

Indian Christian group seeks release of jailed pastors

UCA News (07.11.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3tjamiB> - A group of Christian pastors in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh has appealed for the release of some 30 fellow pastors incarcerated in different jails across the province.

Pastor Jitendra Singh, general secretary of the Pastors’ Association, Uttar Pradesh, told UCA News that all of them were falsely charged with indulging in religious conversions.

Most of the arrests were made after the state’s pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government criminalized religious conversions through allurements, force, or coercion among other means, by enacting an anti-conversion law in February 2021.

“We want justice for the pastors who have been victims of persecution by Hindu nationalists,” Pastor Singh told UCA News on Nov. 7.

The group has sought the intervention of the police commissioner in Kanpur city to protect the Christian pastors from harassment and persecution.

The pastors in their memorandum have alluded to how the hardcore nationalists groups and individuals disrupt Christian prayers gatherings, ransack churches and prayer halls, destroy copies of the Holy Bible and manhandle pastors, priests and nuns, by citing violations of the state's anti-conversion law.

The pastors also urged the police commissioner to provide protection to the community members and their places of worship.

Police Commissioner Bhagirath P Jogdand has assured the group that he would look into their grievances.

"Persecution of Christians has increased since the anti-conversion law came into being," Brother Joy Mathew says adding that this was since the BJP government came to power.

"Many Christian leaders were sent to jail, but so far no one has been convicted as the cases do not stand legal scrutiny in the court. We proclaim the Word of God strictly within the purview of the constitutional safeguards and the state's laws but those attacking us are violating the legal and constitutional mandate. They must be punished," he added.

Uttar Pradesh is India's most populous state with 200 million people. Christians make up 0.18 percent of its population.

Data on Christian persecution collected and released by the rights group, United Christian Forum reveals that the number of violent incidents against Christians rose to 486 in 2021 from 279 in 2020.

The Supreme Court on Sept. 1 directed the federal government to verify allegations of the attacks on members of the Christian community, and asked eight states including Uttar Pradesh, with the maximum number of such cases, to submit reports within two months on the action taken on each complaint.

Photo: Christian devotees participating in a prayer meeting in the city of Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. (Photo: Facebook)

Hindu nationalism is exporting its Islamophobia

Hindutva is linking with other modern fascist movements across the globe.

By Omar Suleiman

RNS (06.10.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3Td1RR3> - For years, one of the biggest threats to Muslims in the world has been the reinvention and rise of Hindu nationalism in India. This

is in part because of the sheer number of Muslims in the country: Indian Muslims represent 10% of all Muslims worldwide. Now the movement known as Hindutva ("Hindu-ness") is not only threatening Indian Muslims or India's proud democratic tradition, it is spreading its radical nationalism around the globe.

The man behind India's modern revival of Hindutva is Prime Minister Narendra Modi, whose career began in the ultraconservative Hindu organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. In the early 2000s, when Modi was chief minister of the western Indian state of Gujarat, a series of anti-Muslim riots there led to nearly 2,000 deaths by some [estimates](#). Modi, who implicitly condoned the violence by doing little to stop it, became known as the Butcher of Gujarat. In 2005, Modi was denied entry to the United States under the [International Religious Freedom Act](#).

But after Modi became prime minister in 2014, President Barack Obama welcomed him over fierce objections and [protests](#) from Indian Americans and human rights advocates. Presidents Donald Trump and Joe Biden have continued to normalize Modi's facism, not only allowing him to visit but, in the case of Trump, appearing with him at a Texas rally celebrating his leadership.

In India, Hindutva has most egregiously impacted Muslims in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, but Hindutva has begun to come west. Last month in Leicester, England, young Hindu men marched through the streets chanting "Jai Sri Ram" — "Glory to Lord Ram," a Hindu nationalist war cry — and attacking Muslims. Attacks at local houses of worship ensued, and nearly 50 people have been [arrested](#).

Pratap Bhanu Mehta, a public intellectual in India, [wrote](#) that the tensions in Leicester followed a familiar ethno-nationalist playbook for stoking violence: "the use of rumors, groups from outside the local community, and marches to create polarization in otherwise peaceful communities."

Majid Freeman, a Muslim activist, [told](#) The New York Times' Megan Specia that the Hindu nationalist aggression in Leicester had drained public trust in the historically diverse community, where Muslims and Hindus together make up about a quarter of the population. "We just want the city to go back to how it was," said Freeman. "Now everyone is looking over their shoulders."

Across the Atlantic, at an India Independence Day parade in Edison, New Jersey, the festivities included [a bulldozer](#) draped with a picture of Modi, whose political party, BJP, is associated with Hindutva causes. Bulldozers have become a symbol of Islamophobia in India, where they have been used to [demolish homes](#) belonging to Muslims on the mere suspicion of participating in protests or riots. A few months ago, I [spoke](#) with Afreen Fatima, an Indian Muslim activist whose home was bulldozed and her father imprisoned.

Pranay Somayajula, outreach coordinator for Hindus for Human Rights, has [emphasized](#) the need for urgent action to counter the spread of Hindutva. "The diaspora, and in particular Hindu Americans, urgently need to speak out against the infiltration of Hindutva hatred into our communities," Somayajula said.

Modi's Hindutva is part of a wider rise in fascist movements across the globe. Masked as ultraconservative nationalism, modern fascism has developed as a racist and anti-immigration identity, rooted in ignorance and moral decay. In many places, it includes a virulent Islamophobia. India's ethno-nationalism has created bonds with other states, such as Israel.

Indeed, in 2019, Sandeep Chakravorty, India's consul general to New York City, [told Kashmiri Hindus and Indian nationals](#) that India will foster Kashmir's depleted Hindu

population by building settlements modeled after Israel's implanting of Jewish residents in Palestinian communities.

To those paying attention, Hindutva is a growing international crisis. The threat of genocide is an abomination emanating from the world's largest democracy, and it's already spilling over into our politics and streets at home.

Photo: A bulldozer razes structures in the area that saw communal violence during a Hindu religious procession in New Delhi's northwest Jahangirpuri neighborhood, India, April 20, 2022. Authorities riding bulldozers razed a number of Muslim-owned shops in New Delhi before India's Supreme Court halted the demolitions, days after communal violence shook the capital and saw dozens arrested. (AP Photo/Altaf Qadri)

Law preventing free religious conversion in Karnataka is "contrary to the Constitution and human dignity"

Agenzia Fides (05.10.2022) - <https://bit.ly/3SPJCS2> - The recent bill that seeks to regulate religious conversions in the Indian state of Karnataka - a state in Southwestern India with more than 64 million inhabitants - goes against the Constitution, violates human dignity, freedom of conscience and religious freedom: this is what Father Irudhaya Jothi, a Jesuit committed to works and social services in the State, declared to Agenzia Fides.

The legislation that the Upper House of the State of Karnataka (the "Karnataka Legislative Council", in the bicameral system) has definitively approved - after the approval of the Lower House in December 2021 - "is a draconian law is unjustified", observes the religious. "Its objective is to scare Christians and members of other communities, to strengthen support for Hindu nationalist parties", he argues.

The current provisions of the bill "can be misused to discourage poor and oppressed communities, especially Dalits (untouchable and marginalized groups) and tribal communities, from education, employment and social assistance programs," observes the Jesuit.

Father Devasagayaraj M. Zacharias, former secretary of the Office for Dalits of the Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI), agrees: "The Constitution of India - he reminds Fides - enshrines the fundamental right of the person to profess, practice and propagate any conscientiously chosen religion. The enactment of the anti-conversion law is contrary to the Indian Constitution and must be challenged in court".

"The procedure to convert from one faith to another - he points out - is so cumbersome and bureaucratic that it is almost impossible to complete the religious conversion". In particular, all Dalits who wish to convert to Christianity "will be hampered only by a political issue."

The "Karnataka Right to Freedom of Religion Bill" was passed by the Karnataka Lower House on December 23, 2021, but was not presented to the Upper House because the

"Bharatiya Janata Party" (BJP), the Hindu nationalist formation that promoted it, did not have a majority in that assembly at the time.

In 2022, thanks to some administrative votes, the BJP also obtained a majority in the Upper House, with 41 members out of 75. On September 15, the bill was introduced by the BJP and approved.

"The Supreme Court has affirmed that freedom of religion does not allow forced conversions. There is freedom of conversion, but not under duress or seduction", said Karnataka's Interior Minister, Araga Jnanendra, when presenting the bill on September 15 and justifying the legislation.

"Religious conversion must be regulated: this is the intention behind the bill. We do not want to deprive anyone of a right, nor violate Article 25 of the Constitution [which guarantees the right to practice and propagate religion, ed.]", stated the Prime Minister of Karnataka, Basavaraj Bommai, explaining the purpose of the law: "We want to maintain law and order and prevent religious conflicts". Catholic writer and journalist John Dayal comments to Fides: "This is not the way to prevent conflicts.

In fact, the law violates the rule of law and religious freedom. Let us remember that India is a democratic republic that has always sanctioned and protected the fundamental rights of the people, including the freedom to profess, practice and propagate one's religion."

According to the bill, "no one can convert or attempt to convert, directly or indirectly, another person from one religion to another by false statement, force, undue influence, duress, seduction, or any fraudulent means, including through marriage; no one will encourage or organize religious conversions of other people". In case of violation, a prison sentence of three to five years and a fine of 25,000 Indian rupees (307 dollars) is foreseen, while the prison sentence is raised to 10 years and the fine of 50,000 rupees (614 dollars) for those who convert minors, women and people from the "Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes" communities, considered marginalized and vulnerable groups.

According to the established procedure, if a person intends to change his faith, the minister of worship must notify the magistrate, who will announce it publicly on a notice board, pending the objections that, where appropriate, will be examined. Subsequently, if no doubts have arisen, the interested party will be summoned by the magistrate to verify his identity and confirm the content of the statement. In addition, family members, relatives or friends of a person who claims to have changed their beliefs can file a "complaint for forced conversion" in court.

The practice of proposing regulations that regulate or restrict religious conversion has taken hold for some years in the Indian Federation, thanks to the nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party. Several states in northern, western and eastern India such as Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand have passed laws restricting religious conversions. Karnataka, in southern India, has been the latest to enact such a law.

Indian Christians have always opposed these measures, and in some cases have filed legal challenges.

Photo: fides.org

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/3BtPoBl> - 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 Faruqi, 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 Faruqi 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

Agencia 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
