

## **Table of Contents**

- ***[Bomb attempt against Jehovah's Witnesses' gathering: three dead and dozens injured](#)***
  - ***[Report on Hindu nationalism, legal repression and mob violence](#)***
  - ***[Religious freedom in the context of a Free Trade Agreement](#)***
  - ***[Muslim Law Board's stand sought on nikah halala](#)***
  - ***[UN experts alarmed by continuing abuses in Manipur](#)***
  - ***[Top court grants reprieve to Indian priest in 'baptism' case](#)***
  - ***[India teacher investigated for telling pupils to slap Muslim peer](#)***
  - ***[Distressing trend of 'Reverse dowry': Shattering families and challenging values](#)***
  - ***[High Court seeks Maha govt response on Swamy's PIL against Pandharpur Temples Act](#)***
  - ***[Five killed in communal clashes in Haryana State](#)***
  - ***[Tribal Christians protest in poll-bound Indian state](#)***
  - ***[The Hindu festival of Ram Navami sparked anti-Muslim riots across India](#)***
  - ***[India's Manipur remains tense weeks after 400 churches were burned, 60 Christians killed](#)***
  - ***[Two synagogues torched in northeastern state of Manipur](#)***
  - ***[Misinformation on India's Muslim population fuels Islamophobia](#)***
  - ***[Open letter to Josep Borrell, EU Vice-President, on his visit to India](#)***
  - ***[Concern in Goa as Hindu group storms Catholic college](#)***
- 

## **Bomb attempt against Jehovah's Witnesses' gathering: three dead and dozens injured**

***A former Jehovah's Witness claims responsibility. After [Germany](#) (March 2023) and [Italy](#) (April 2023), Jehovah's Witnesses are now killed in a bomb attack in another democracy, India***

By Willy Fautre, director of Human Rights Without Frontiers.

HRWF (31.10.2023) - An explosive device blew up at a convention center in southern India killing three persons and wounding dozens of others on Sunday 29 October. About 2,300 Jehovah's Witnesses were gathered for a three-day gathering at the Zamra International Convention Center in the town of Kalamassery in Kerala state when the explosion took place.

The state's top police officer, Sheik Darvesh Saheb, said an initial investigation has revealed an improvised explosive device was used.

The wounded, many of them with burn injuries, were transported to hospital for treatment, he said.

Videos filmed right after the blast and shared online showed fire inside the convention center and rescuers helping people evacuate the building.

Dominic Martin, a former Jehovah's Witness, claimed in a six-minute Facebook video, subsequently removed that he was behind Sunday's deadly [massive blasts at a gathering](#) of the Christian group.

He surrendered to cops after posting the footage online saying he was responsible for the explosions at the Zamra International Convention Center in Kerala. He was put in custody.

He said in a social media posting claimed Jehovah's Witnesses were "anti-national", refusing to sing the national anthem, and said he tried to convince the group to change its views on a number of its teachings.

Hindu nationalism is responsible for many acts of violence against Muslims and Christians in India.

About 2,300 Jehovah's Witnesses were attending the three-day event at the convention center and Martin was not registered to attend.

The movement has about 60,000 followers in India which has a population of over 1.4 billion inhabitants. It is apolitical and non-violent. In all the countries where they are established, their members are conscientious objectors to military service.

Jehovah's Witnesses are a global religious minority in over 200 countries and territories.

### **Media coverage**

International media outlets largely and fairly covered the bomb blast.

[The Hindu](#) was however virulent about the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses, voicing the hate speech of the perpetrator of the bomb attempt.

As to the French-language media outlets of France and Belgium, two democratic states known for their hostility towards Jehovah's Witnesses and other minority religious movements, they have ignored the incident as if it had never happened.

On 29 October, the Agence France Presse (AFP) issued a press release titled "India: two dead and 35 injured in an explosion at a Christian gathering." Noteworthy is that AFP avoided mentioning Jehovah's Witnesses as victims in the title. In a biased and useless way, AFP said Jehovah's Witnesses were "regularly accused of being a cult." The bad practice of qualifying a religious or belief movement as a "cult" was condemned in 2022 by the European Court of Human Rights in its decision concerning the case [Tonchev and Others v. Bulgaria](#). The Court then stated that terms such as "cults" or those deriving from the Latin "secta" in languages other than English are "likely to have negative consequences on the exercise of religious freedom" of the members of the groups so stigmatized and should not be used in official documents. The derogatory statement of AFP contributes to the climate of hostility against a non-violent and law-abiding religious group.

Moreover, AFP wrongly links the movement of Jehovah's Witnesses dating back to the 1870s in the US with the American Evangelical movement. Both movements have always been totally unrelated.

[Kerala attacks: India police investigate deadly blasts targeting Jehovah's Witnesses](#) - BBC

[India police detain man as suspect in explosion that killed 3 people at Jehovah's Witness gathering](#) - AP News

[Suspect detained in an explosion that killed 3 at Jehovah's Witness event in India](#) - ABC News

[Bomb blast at Jehovah's Witnesses meeting in India kills 3, wounds dozens](#) - South China Morning Post

[India police probe bomb blasts that killed two in Kerala](#) - Reuters

[Explosion hits Jehovah's Witnesses prayer meeting in India's Kerala](#) - Al Jazeera

[Kochi convention centre blast: 2 killed, dozens injured in blasts during prayer meet; Shah calls for NIA, NSG probe](#) - Indian Express

*Thousands of members of Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered for a meeting on Sunday.*

[Enraged by 'teachings' of Jehovah's Witnesses, planted bombs, says suspect](#) - The Hindu

[Bomb blast at Jehovah's Witnesses meeting in India kills 2, wounds dozens | South China Morning Post \(scmp.com\)](#) - South China Morning Post

[Ex-Jehovah's Witness claims responsibility in Facebook video for deadly blasts in India](#) - New York Post

---

## **Report on Hindu nationalism, legal repression and mob violence**

[International Christian Concern](#) (05.10.2023) - International Christian Concern (ICC) released a report today outlining the concerning religious freedom conditions for Christians and other religious minorities in India. As India recently celebrated its 76th anniversary of its independence on August 15, the country is further from its roots as a secular democracy than ever. Led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing religious nationalist party, India is moving rapidly to restrict the rights of religious minorities across the country.

Legally, the rise of anti-conversion laws criminalizes minority religious expression by making it illegal to convert, or attempt to convert, members of another faith. In practice, Christians and Muslims are the ones charged under these laws. Acts as innocuous as talking about heaven or offering snacks after a church service fall afoul of the laws, with enhanced sentences mandated in cases involving more than one person, a woman, a child, or a member of the many protected ethnic or caste communities.

Other legal barriers, like those barring Christians and Muslims from social welfare schemes, also serve to chill religious freedom. Socially, Hindu nationalism restricts freedom across India by fueling mob violence against Christians and Muslims. ICC's report considers the recent outbreak of violence against Christians in Chhattisgarh and the ongoing ethnoreligious violence happening in Manipur. Both instances are instructive not only to the state of religious freedom in India but the Indian government's lackluster response and its refusal to extend substantive protections to its religious minority population.

This report also suggests several policy recommendations to the U.S. government, which has, for decades, taken a soft line with the Indian government on human rights. Its priority, it would seem, is to woo what it considers to be an important geopolitical ally in its fight against growing Chinese global influence around the world. Though the U.S. does highlight India's religious freedom issues on occasion, it is not consistent in its messaging and has thus far chosen to avoid the most potent tools at its disposal.

To read the full report, [click here.](#)

---

## Religious freedom in the context of a Free Trade Agreement

**HRWF (21.09.2023) - On 19 September, the DROI committee held an exchange of views on the human rights dimension of the negotiations on an EU-India Free Trade Agreement. In preparation, the London Story Foundation has [compiled an overview](#) of evidence on religious freedom concerns associated with the India Free Trade Agreement, with accompanying recommendations.**

### Situation of religious minorities

41. India is witnessing a steep marginalisation and curtailment of rights of its religious minorities through laws, while political leaders actively incite further violence against minorities by engaging in hate speech.<sup>68</sup> In 2021, a panel of independent experts under the guidance of former International Criminal Court prosecutor Fatou Bensouda found credible evidence of crimes against humanity committed in India against its Muslim minorities.<sup>69</sup> The Early Warning Project in 2023 ranks India 8th highest risk of concern for mass atrocities against religious minorities among 162 countries.<sup>70</sup>

42. In ongoing violence in Manipur, North-East India, over 120 people have lost their lives.<sup>71</sup> This armed conflict started in May 2023 and has strong religious elements, with at least 250 churches being destroyed.<sup>72</sup> On September 4, UN human rights experts issued a press release expressing their alarm over the scale of human rights violations involved in the Manipur violence and at the “inadequate humanitarian response” in its wake.<sup>73</sup> They said the situation was “grave” and pointed out that it has involved alleged acts of “sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, home destruction, forced displacement, torture and ill-treatment”.<sup>74</sup>

43. There is evidence of widespread violence in India against people on grounds of protected characteristics, especially religion. Such targeted violence disproportionately affects religious minorities. Of over 19014 verified victims of communal violence, physical assaults, and lynching since 2017 (status: August 2022), the majority (86.7%) are Muslims.<sup>75</sup> Violence against Christians also rose by 81% between 2020 and 2021.<sup>76</sup> More than 2000 Christians were attacked and injured in the first nine months of 2021.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, Hindu supremacist groups have called for economic boycotts of Muslim vendors.<sup>78</sup>

Identity of victims: Muslims: 16 477 – Christians: 1653 – Hindus: 183 - Other: 701.  
Source: Foundation The London Story (2022)

44. India is systematically excluding its minority population in violation of religious freedoms enshrined in the ICCPR. The Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA) allows the government to fast-track asylum claims of irregular immigrants from specific communities.<sup>79</sup> The OHCHR called the CAA “fundamentally discriminatory in nature”, as it adds a religious criterion to citizenship and specifically excludes Muslims.<sup>80</sup> Home

Minister Amit Shah announced that a National Registry of Citizens (NRC) would be conducted for the whole of India.<sup>81</sup> In Assam, the NRC has already rendered 1.9 million citizens stateless.<sup>82</sup> The NRC coupled with the CAA risks mass statelessness of Muslims and other marginalised groups, leading to mass protests across the country that were brutally quelled.<sup>83</sup>

45. India grossly discriminates against its minority population through laws, in violation of the fundamental freedom of religion in Article 18 of the ICCPR. 23 out of 29 states in India have introduced laws criminalising cow slaughter, trade, and consumption of beef with harsh sentences.<sup>84</sup> In the state of Gujarat, the punishment for cow slaughter was increased to life imprisonment. Several BJP-ruled states have passed laws requiring governmental permission for religious conversion for marriage, which are justified with reference to the conspiracy theory that Muslim men trick Hindu women into conversion.<sup>85</sup> Such laws violate the right to family life (Article 23) and right to freedom of religion (Article 18) in the ICCPR. Such laws have also emboldened vigilante groups, who engage in extrajudicial violence against people from religious minorities in response to alleged violations of these laws.<sup>86</sup>

### Short-term risks

46. Worsening persecution of religious minorities places India at the risk of mass atrocities, which is already visible in the ongoing armed conflict in Manipur.<sup>87</sup> Violence against Muslim vendors, traders and business people, and calls for boycott against minority businesses, create potentially serious concerns for the consequences of increased trade moving forward.<sup>88</sup> Given that the EU does not traditionally consider religious minorities stakeholder groups in their human rights impact assessments, the risks for this stakeholder group are not yet known, and urgent research is needed to identify and mitigate potential harms. This lack of awareness can result in inadequate protection of the rights and well-being of religious minorities.

### Recommendations in the context of the Free Trade Agreement

**47. The EU and India should both conduct a comprehensive human rights and sustainability impact assessment (HRIA) before continuing further negotiations. The HRIA should consider the impact on vulnerable and often discriminated groups, especially on religious minorities. This should particularly examine the effects of economic boycotts of Muslims ongoing in India.**

**48. The EU and India should give explicit mention to the rights of gender, sexual, religious and ethnic minorities and caste-oppressed groups, as minority groups all benefit from equal rights and protections. Otherwise, the mention of minority rights risks being a box-ticking exercise.**

**49. The EU and India should jointly commit to repealing discriminatory laws, i.e. laws that prohibit the free choice of religion under the guise of preventing involuntary conversions. Discriminatory laws that restrict the free choice of religion can be used as tools of religious persecution and violate the right to equality and freedom of choice.**

### Footnotes

68 The Wire (2020), *Anurag Thakur Leads Crowd to Chant 'Shoot the Traitors'*, <https://thewire.in/politics/anurag-thakur-delhi-chants>

69 Centre for Human Rights, University of the Free State (June 2022), *Report of the Panel of Independent International Experts (PIIE) to examine information about alleged violations of international law committed against Muslims in India since July 2019*, [https://www.ufs.ac.za/docs/librariesprovider21/default-document-library/piie-report-final.pdf?sfvrsn=624e4920\\_0](https://www.ufs.ac.za/docs/librariesprovider21/default-document-library/piie-report-final.pdf?sfvrsn=624e4920_0)

70 Early Warning Project (2022), *Countries at Risk for Mass Killing 2022–23: Early Warning Project Statistical Risk Assessment Results*, <https://earlywarningproject.usmm.org/reports/countries-at-risk-for-mass-killing-2022-23-early-warning-project-statistical-risk-assessment-results>

71 European Parliament (2023), *European Parliament resolution of 13 July 2023 on India, the situation in Manipur*, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0289\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0289_EN.html)

72 Foundation The London Story (2023), *Background Dossier on Ethno-Religious Violence and Human Rights Abuses in Manipur, India*, <https://thelondonstory.org/report/background-dossier-on-ethno-religious-violence-and-human-rights-abuses-in-manipur-india/>

73 OHCHR (2023), *India: UN experts alarmed by continuing abuses in Manipur*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/india-un-experts-alarmed-continuing-abuses-manipur>

74 OHCHR (2023), *India: UN experts alarmed by continuing abuses in Manipur*, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/09/india-un-experts-alarmed-continuing-abuses-manipur>

75 The London Story (2022), *UPR Cycle IV India Factsheet*, <https://thelondonstory.org/wp-content/uploads/UPR-Cycle-IV-India-Factsheet-1.pdf>

76 National Herald (2022), *Violent attacks against Christians up by 81 per cent since 2020, 505 incidents in 2021*, <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/violent-attacks-against-christians-up-by-81-per-cent-since-2020-505-incidents-in-2021>

77 DW (2021), *Why are Christians being targeted in India?* <https://www.dw.com/en/why-are-attacks-on-christians-increasing-in-india/a-60293867>

78 Kaushik Raj (2023), *Indian Muslims in Haryana face calls for economic boycott after violence*, AlJazeera, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/12/muslims-in-haryana-face-calls-for-economic-boycott-after-violence-in-nuh>

79 USCIRF (2020), *The Citizenship (Amendment) Act in India*,

<https://www.uscifr.gov/resources/factsheet-citizenship-amendment-act-india>

80 United Nations (2019), *New citizenship law in India 'fundamentally discriminatory': UN human rights office*, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/12/1053511>

81 The Hindu (2019), *Centre plans NRC exercise all over the country: Amit Shah*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/nrc-process-to-be-carried-out-in-entire-country-says-amit-shah-in-rajya-sabha/article61670698.ece>

82 Foundation The London Story (2021), *Assam Dossier*, <https://thelondonstory.org/2021/09/20/assam-dossier-2021/>

83 PUDR (2019), *Bloody Sunday*, <https://pudr.org/sites/default/files/2019-12/Jamia%20Report%202019%20for%20screen.pdf>

84 The Wire (2021), *Book Excerpt: The Many Anti-Muslim Laws Brought in By the Modi Government*, <https://thewire.in/politics/price-of-the-modi-years-book-excerpt>

85 AlJazeera (2021), *India's 'love jihad' laws: Another attempt to subjugate Muslims*, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/15/indias-love-jihad-laws-another-attempt-to-subjugate-muslims>

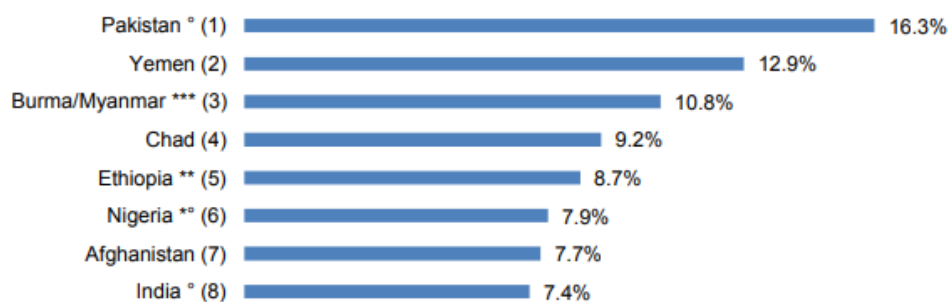
86 Mahibul Hoque (2023), *Muslim man with mental health conditions lynched in Assam*, Maktoob Media, <https://maktoobmedia.com/latest-news/muslim-man-with-mental-health-conditions-lynched-in-assam/>; Sukrita Baruah (2023), *4 lynchings in a month in Assam, DGP tells team to act 'irrespective of caste, creed, religion*, Indian Express, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/assam-4-lynchings-dgp-8897182/>

87 Early Warning Project (2022), *Countries at Risk for Mass Killing 2022–23: Early Warning Project Statistical Risk Assessment Results*, <https://earlywarningproject.ushmm.org/reports/countries-at-risk-for-mass-killing-2022-23-early-warning-project-statistical-risk-assessment-results>

88 CSW (2023), *CSW input to the Trade Sustainability Impact Assessment of the EUIndia trade and investment agreements*, [https://www.eu-india-tsia.eu/\\_files/ugd/70e9b1\\_edae9a42a886427180d0c9510ad1078c.pdf](https://www.eu-india-tsia.eu/_files/ugd/70e9b1_edae9a42a886427180d0c9510ad1078c.pdf)

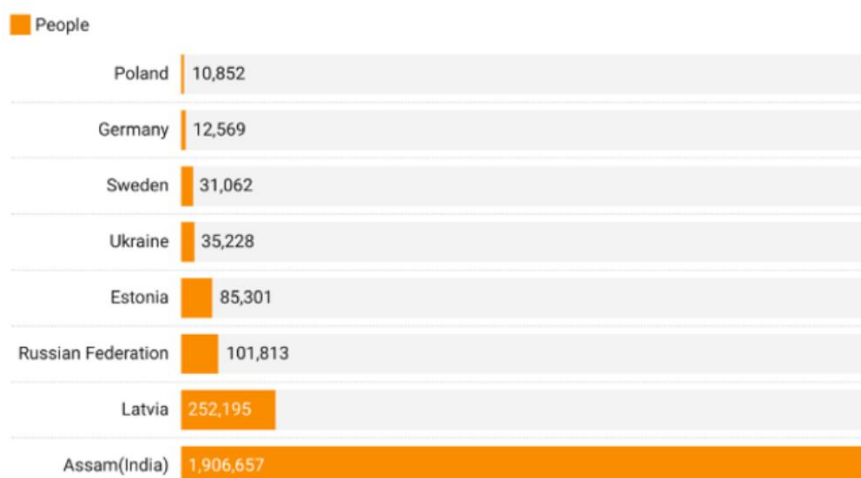
#### STATISTICAL RISK ASSESSMENT 2022–23

Figure 2: Top 30 countries by estimated risk of new mass killing, 2022–23



## Number of stateless people in different regions

Data for Assam from 2019



Source: Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015 (2016), • Created with Datawrapper

Source: Foundation The London Story (2022)

---

## Muslim Law Board's stand sought on nikah halala

**The controversial short-term marriage forms are not practiced commonly in India, says the AIMPLB; with regard to minimum age, it adds that Islam allows marriage when boys and girls come of age.**

By ZIYA US SALAM

[The Hindu](#) (25.08.2023) - The Law Commission has asked the All India Muslim Personal Law Board (AIMPLB) to unambiguously state its position on *nikah halala* and *muta*, two controversial forms of marriage. The Commission has also sought clarification on Islamic law regarding the minimum age for marriage.

These queries were posed by Law Commission chairman Justice (retired) Ritu Raj Awasthi in a two-hour long meeting on Thursday with an 11-member delegation of the AIMPLB, led by its president Maulana Khalid Saifullah Rehmani.

These questions assume significance as petitions against *nikah halala* and *muta* have been filed in the Supreme Court by several Muslim women, who have sought a prohibition on both forms of marriage.

### Short-term marriages

*Muta* is a consensual short-term marriage with a specific time frame for matrimony and divorce. *Nikah halala* is often forced upon a woman who has been thrice divorced by her



husband, after which the spouses seek a reunion. It is intimately linked with instant triple *talaq*, which was invalidated by the top court in 2017.

The Board members voiced their opposition to *nikah halala* the way it is often practiced in the country, calling it “a mockery of religion”, according to a member of the delegation who did not wish to be named. A woman who has received three instant divorces is at times asked by some clerics to undergo *halala*, which is a short-term marriage to another man followed by divorce, before being eligible to resume marital life with her erstwhile husband.

The AIMPLB delegation also felt that the Commission was making “an issue out of a non-issue” with regard to *muta*. “It is not practised in our country. An attempt is being made to turn a rare instance into a popular practice,” the delegation member said, adding, “At a time when the Supreme Court has allowed extra marital relations, talking of *muta* is incongruous.”

### **Minimum marriage age**

On the minimum age for marriage being raised to 21 years by the government, the Board reiterated that the Muslim community had been following the law on the subject. “Islam allows marriage when boys and girls come of age, to avoid premarital relations,” the delegation told the Commission, according to the member, who added, “However, in modern times, early marriage is usually linked to socio-economic parameters. A poor family wants to marry off the daughter quickly so there is one less mouth to feed. It cuts across religions. In Islam, there is no specific age for marriage. If the spouses are in a position to fulfil the obligations of marriage, they can marry.”

The AIMPLB delegation, which included women members as well, reiterated that, “if anybody has a problem with the personal law, then he or she can solemnise marriage under Special Marriage Act, which is a secular law. For such marriages, Indian Succession Act will be applicable.”

### **‘Muslims are target of UCC’**

The delegation reiterated the AIMPLB’s strong opposition to the proposed Uniform Civil Code, insisting that no debate can be conducted on Shariah. “The Shariah law (Muslim Personal Law) has two components, one is based on the Quran and Sunnah (Prophet’s words and actions) and the other is Ijtihad (Islamic scholars’ opinions). The first part is unalterable, even Muslim *ulemma* cannot make any change in it. Ijtihad can differ with time and situations. Therefore, for us, even a minute change in the basic format of Shariah will not be acceptable. It is non-negotiable,” said Board spokesman S.Q.R. Ilyas.

The Muslim leaders also asked the Commission if it had undertaken any survey or had any data on the basis of which the UCC was being proposed. “We asked the Commission why only Muslims were not being exempted from the proposed Uniform Civil Code when the government is ready to exclude tribals and Christians of northeastern States. It means that only Muslims are the target of UCC,” Mr. Ilyas concluded.

## UN experts alarmed by continuing abuses in Manipur

[UN OHCHR](#) (04.09.2023) - UN experts\* today raised the alarm about reports of serious human rights violations and abuses in the Northeast State of Manipur in India, including alleged acts of sexual violence, extrajudicial killings, home destruction, forced displacement, torture and ill-treatment.

The experts pointed to an “inadequate humanitarian response” in the wake of the grave humanitarian situation in Manipur following the latest round of community conflict between the predominantly Hindu Meitei and the predominantly Christian Kuki ethnic communities that erupted in May 2023.

By mid-August 2023, an estimated 160 persons had reportedly been killed, mostly from the Kuki ethnic community, and over 300 injured. The conflict also reportedly resulted in tens of thousands of people from the communities being displaced, thousands of homes and hundreds of churches being burnt down, as well the destruction of farmland, loss of crops and loss of livelihood.

“We are appalled by the reports and images of gender-based violence targeting hundreds of women and girls of all ages, and predominantly of the Kuki ethnic minority. The alleged violence includes gang rape, parading women naked in the street, severe beatings causing death, and burning them alive or dead,” the experts said.

“It is particularly concerning that the violence seems to have been preceded and incited by hateful and inflammatory speech that spread online and offline to justify the atrocities committed against the Kuki ethnic minority, particularly women, on account of their ethnicity and religious belief,” they said. “We are further alarmed by the reported misuse of counterterrorism measures to legitimise acts of violence and repression against ethnic and religious minorities.”

The experts said recent events in Manipur were another tragic milestone in the steadily deteriorating situation for religious and ethnic minorities in India.

“We have serious concerns about the apparent slow and inadequate response by the Government of India, including law enforcement, to stem physical and sexual violence and hate speech in Manipur,” the experts said.

The experts welcomed the fact-finding mission conducted by lawyers and human rights defenders in Manipur and the follow-up by the Supreme Court of India on the situation in Manipur, though the response could have come in a timelier manner. They urged the Supreme Court to continue monitoring the response of the Government and other actors, with a focus on justice, accountability, and reparations. “We are also concerned about reported criminalization and harassment of human rights defenders documenting the cases,” they said.

They urged the Government to step up relief efforts to those affected and to take robust and timely action to investigate acts of violence and hold perpetrators to account, including public officials who may have aided and abetted the incitement of racial and religious hatred and violence.

***\*The experts: Reem Alsalem, [Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences](#); Michael Fakhri, [Special Rapporteur on the right to food](#); Irene Khan, [Special Rapporteur on the protection and promotion of freedom of opinion and expression](#); Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, [Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism](#); Balakrishnan Rajagopal, [Special](#)***

[Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing](#); Nazila Ghanea, [Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief](#); Morris Tidball-Binz, [Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions](#); Mary Lawlor, [Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders](#); Margaret Satterthwaite, [Special Rapporteur on the independence of judges and lawyers](#); Fernand de Varennes, [Special Rapporteur on minority issues](#); Ashwini. K.P., [Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance](#); Paula Gaviria Betancur, [Special Rapporteur on the human rights of internally displaced persons](#); Alice Jill Edwards, [Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment](#); Claudia Mahler, [Independent Expert on the enjoyment of all human rights by older persons](#); Dorothy Estrada Tanck (Chair), Ivana Radačić (Vice-Chair), Elizabeth Broderick, Meskerem Geset Techane and Melissa Upreti - [Working Group on discrimination against women and girls](#).

Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups are part of what is known as the [Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN human rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms. Special Procedures mandate-holders are independent human rights experts appointed by the Human Rights Council to address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. They are not UN staff and are independent from any government or organisation. They serve in their individual capacity and do not receive a salary for their work.

---

## Top court grants reprieve to Indian priest in 'baptism' case

*The priest was accused of baptizing a child from an inter-religious marriage in violation of Gujarat's anti-conversion law*

By [UCA News reporter](#)

UCA NEWS (28.08.2023) - The top court in India has restrained police against going ahead with a criminal case under the sweeping anti-conversion law against a Catholic priest for baptizing a child from an inter-religious marriage.

"The priest baptized the child as the mother was a practicing Catholic and the child followed the religion of the mother," said Jesuit priest Father Cedric Prakash, who is closely following the case in the western state of Gujarat dating back to 2012.

The home state of Prime Minister Narendra Modi enacted the draconian anti-conversion law in 2003.

"It is a clear case of misuse of the anti-conversion law to falsely implicate the Catholic priest in a criminal offense," Prakash, a rights activist based in the state, told UCA News on Aug. 28.

"The Supreme Court has done the right thing," the priest said.

A bench consisting of Chief Justice D Y Chandrachud, Justices J B Pardiwala, and Manoj Misra on Aug. 25 stayed the criminal proceedings against the priest, whose identity is not revealed due to threat to his life. It listed the matter for hearing after three weeks.

The priest had moved the top court against the recent order of Gujarat High Court that dismissed his plea for quashing the case under provisions of the anti-conversion law. Both the mother and the father had given their consent for the baptism, the priest told the High Court.

The priest, however, was accused of baptizing the child without prior permission from the government as the father of the child was a Hindu.

The father of the child filed a complaint in 2014 and the police in Gujarat had concluded the investigation.

In 2020, however, police again began a probe following a complaint from a social worker, accusing the priest of violating the stringent Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act that criminalizes religious conversion through allurement, force and coercion.

The law is also called the 'anti-love-jihad law' because it has provisions against alleged fraudulent religious conversions through marriage.

In March 2021, the pro-Hindu government of Vijay Rupani added more stringent punishments against forced religious conversions. The new law invites a maximum jail term of seven years.

Eleven of India's 28 provincial states have enacted an anti-conversion law. These laws criminalized inter-religious marriages, especially between Hindu girls and Christian or Muslim boys.

According to Church leaders, the law is often used to target Christians.

"The anti-conversion law itself is against the basic principles and spirit of the constitution, especially against fundamental rights," the Jesuit priest said.

Father Prakash is part of a rights group that has challenged the various anti-conversion laws enacted by the states in the Supreme Court.

Christians make up 2.3 percent of the 1.4 billion population in India with more than 80 percent following Hinduism.

---

## **India teacher investigated for telling pupils to slap Muslim peer**

**[BBC](#) (26.08.2023) - Police in India are investigating a video that shows a school teacher telling her pupils to slap their seven-year-old Muslim classmate.**

The boy is filmed in tears as he is slapped, allegedly for getting his times tables wrong.

The video went viral on social media, and has triggered widespread dismay and condemnation.

India's opposition leader Rahul Gandhi blamed the government for stoking religious intolerance.

The incident happened on Thursday at a private school in Uttar Pradesh, a northern state.

"Why are you hitting him so lightly? Hit him hard," the teacher is heard telling the children, as the boy stands crying.

"Start hitting him on the waist... His face is turning red, hit him on the waist instead," she added.

Authorities in India confirmed the video was real, and said they would take action.

The victim's father reported the incident to police in the Muzaffarnagar district, and has pulled him out of the school. But he did not press charges.

Rights groups have warned that hate crimes and violence against India's large Muslim minority have increased since Prime Minister Narendra Modi took office in 2014.

Uttar Pradesh has been governed by his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) since 2017.

Mr Gandhi said the party had contributed to religious tensions felt across India.

"Sowing the poison of discrimination in the minds of innocent children, turning a holy place like school into a marketplace of hatred," he posted to social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

"This is the same kerosene spread by the BJP that has set every corner of India on fire." In June during a visit to the US Mr Modi told journalists that there was "absolutely no space for discrimination" in India.

---

## **Distressing trend of 'Reverse dowry': Shattering families and challenging values**

[Florida Star](#) (24.08.2023) - Located in northwestern India region of Punjab, where a vibrant Sikh majority thrives, a troubling practice known as "reverse dowry" casts a shadow on the sanctity of marriage.

Despite Sikhism's denouncement of dowry, the tradition of demanding monetary or material gifts from the spouse's family persists. As more individuals from Punjab pursue opportunities abroad, the practice has left families shattered, marriages in ruins and spouses abandoned.

This alarming trend transcends religious boundaries, impacting various communities across the country.

### ***A tale of love, betrayal and the pursuit of justice***

Devinder Singh and his wife, Jaspal Kaur, find themselves entangled in a relentless pursuit of justice for their son, Ravinder (whose name has been changed to protect his privacy). The once-promising union between Ravinder and Simran (whose name has also

been changed) took an unexpected turn, leaving the family no choice but to seek answers and closure.

In 2017, the couple embarked on a journey of love, uniting their lives with dreams of a blissful future. But destiny had other plans as Simran's aspiration to study abroad changed the course of their lives.

Devinder, as a doting father-in-law, sold his cherished land for \$68,000, determined to sponsor his daughter-in-law's pursuit of higher education in Canada.

With each installment of financial support sent to Simran while she was abroad, the family eagerly awaited her return. However, to their dismay, Simran's attitude underwent an inexplicable transformation. She cut off all communication with her husband and in-laws — leaving them distressed and desperate for answers.

"We narrated our situation to the family of our daughter-in-law in the hope for a reunion, but they didn't help and sided with their daughter," Singh said.

In a move to salvage their son's marriage, the family sent Ravinder to Canada to meet Simran and understand the sudden change in her demeanor. The confrontation revealed a harsh reality: Simran's desire to sever all ties and demand for a divorce.

Seeking closure, the family requested the return of the substantial financial aid they had provided for Simran's education. She vehemently refused to reimburse the money.

Undeterred by the adversities, Devinder Singh and his family now seek a settlement that could provide their son with a chance at a fresh start in Canada. They propose that Simran supports Ravinder's application for permanent residency in exchange for the financial assistance previously provided.

"We told her family that we will be forced to take legal action in view of her decision for divorce if she does not help our son get a permanent residence of Canada in exchange of money we have paid to her," Kaur said.

The implications of dowry are far-reaching, encompassing issues of gender inequality and the objectification of women. In this alarming trend, the bride expects financial support from the groom's family as a prerequisite for marriage — primarily to pursue studies abroad initially — but with the ultimate goal of gaining citizenship and paving the way for the husband to join later.

This practice places significant financial burdens on the groom's family and raises ethical questions about commodifying the sacred institution of marriage. The demand for dowry or gifts, regardless of the direction, also perpetuates unequal power dynamics, undermining the principles of gender equity that Sikhism staunchly advocates.

### ***Satwinder Kaur: A warrior for abandoned spouses***

Devinder Singh and his wife's quest for a settlement took them to Satwinder Kaur in the bustling city of Ludhiana, Punjab. The 41-year-old Satwinder has dedicated her life to assisting those who find themselves abandoned by their spouses after they migrate abroad.

Satwinder's own harrowing journey has inspired her unwavering commitment to helping others in similar circumstances. Married in 2009, she endured months of longing and uncertainty as her husband left for Ukraine in pursuit of work, only to settle there permanently and sever all ties with India.

As time passed, Satwinder's husband began fabricating excuses to distance himself from her and divest her of properties. However, driven by an indomitable spirit, she refused to succumb to despair. Tenaciously fighting for her rights, Satwinder filed a case against her husband, exposing his actions. The legal battle stretched over several years, testing her resilience and fortitude.

"I was emotionally blackmailed by my husband after he returned from Ukraine with the aim of evicting me from his house," Satwinder said. "On his insistence, we moved to a rented house with all my belongings. Unfortunately, I couldn't see through his tactics and blindly accepted his decisions."

After evicting her from his house by deceit, he went back to Ukraine never to return. But in a remarkable turn of events last year, after enduring a long and arduous journey, Satwinder and her husband reached a mutual understanding, leading to their divorce. This resolution marked a significant milestone in her pursuit of justice and closure.

"I am divorcee; my life has been spoiled," Satwinder said. "Of the 41 years since my birth, 14 were lost in pursuit of justice."

Satwinder's personal triumph has ignited a fire within her to extend a hand to others like Devinder Singh and Jaspal Kaur. Satwinder runs a nongovernmental organization known as Abh Nahi (or "Not Anymore") dedicated to counsel those whose spouses abandoned them after settling abroad. So far, it has received a staggering 900 complaints, including those from 800 women.

### ***Punjab's Diaspora: A Tale of Dreams and Heartbreaks***

Embarking on the journey of a lifetime, thousands from Punjab venture abroad each year, driven by aspirations of a better life and brighter prospects. A significant number make foreign lands their new home, scripting success stories that warm the heart.

Yet, amid this tale of dreams fulfilled lies a heartrending reality that casts a shadow over the euphoria. A poignant trend emerges, where some men, having utilized dowry money for their foreign ventures, choose not to return to their homeland, leaving behind devastated wives and families.

The anguish of abandonment weighs heavy, shattering dreams of togetherness and leaving families grappling with emotional and financial upheaval.

There are an alarming 30,000 cases of abandoned families in Punjab that reveal the gravity of the issue. The nonresident Indian wing of the Punjab police handles an array of cases — ranging from fraud and property disputes to matrimonial conflicts. Distressingly, the numbers surged to 4,266 cases in 2019 and 3,829 cases in 2020, laying bare the magnitude of the crisis.

### ***Love, deceit and the battle for a daughter's identity: Sarabjeet's 13-year struggle***

From the quaint district of Mukeria in Punjab, Sarabjeet Kaur's life took a fateful turn when she married Deler Singh in 2007. A tale of promises and dreams, their union seemed blissful, but fate had something far more intricate in store.

Sarabjeet, an ambitious young woman who had passed her exams, wed Deler Singh, a younger man. Their love blossomed, and they were blessed with a beautiful daughter two years into their marriage. However, in 2010, Deler Singh, an electrician, was driven by

the allure of opportunities abroad. He decided to set foot on foreign soil, hoping to carve a prosperous future for his family.

In a bid to support her husband's dreams, Sarabjeet sold her jewelry and borrowed money from her family to fund Deler Singh's journey overseas. Despite the distance, they remained in touch until 2015, speaking often over the phone. However, cracks started appearing when Deler Singh fabricated a deceitful story to escape his marriage with Sarabjeet. He sought a divorce, claiming a contract marriage in Canada to secure permanent residency and promising to reunite once his status was settled. Sensing the plot, Sarabjeet refused to be swayed, triggering a rupture in their communication.

"In 2018, I complained to the police against my husband and in-laws. But my in-laws hit back a counter case blaming me of (poor) character," Sarabjeet said. "My husband filed a case against me charging me of burglary and claiming that I was not his wife."

As the years passed, Sarabjeet discovered the painful truth: Deler Singh had married a Pakistani woman in Canada. To attain permanent residency, he allegedly forged documents and faked divorce papers, leaving Sarabjeet shattered and their daughter's identity stolen.

"I called his second wife after finding her details on social media and told her that he was already married with a daughter, but she did not listen." Sarabjeet said. "She told me that he had told her that I was their domestic help and not so beautiful and he was forcibly married to me by his family."

For 13 years, Sarabjeet has fought an arduous battle — not just for herself, but for her 12-year-old daughter, who yearns for a father she has never seen and who has never acknowledged her existence.

Sikh teachings emphasize simplicity, humility and egalitarian values. The faith encourages followers to approach life with a sense of oneness with all of humanity.

Scholars and religious experts emphasize that Sikhism unequivocally rejects all forms of dowry, viewing it as a manifestation of materialism and greed. Sikh teachings uphold equality, compassion and respect for all individuals, regardless of gender.

Awareness of this disconcerting practice has spurred various initiatives within Sikh communities and broader society to address and eradicate the trends of dowry and reverse dowry. Community-driven campaigns, backed by religious leaders, have sought to raise awareness about Sikh teachings, highlighting the sanctity of marriage based on love, trust and mutual respect.

Manjit Singh, a Sikh priest, is shedding light on a disquieting reality of dowry that raises alarms about the erosion of faith and values.

Speaking with conviction, Manjit Singh shared his concern about the unsettling trend where financial gains abroad come at the expense of losing faith in one's religion.

"The temptation of acquiring wealth in foreign lands should not eclipse the essence of Sikhism, which emphasizes integrity, compassion, and humility," Singh said.

Drawing attention to the gravity of the issue, Singh highlighted that the practices of dowry and reverse dowry transcend religious barriers. Irrespective of religious teachings, the allurement of tradition and societal norms has shamelessly perpetuated the practice of dowry across various faiths, including Hinduism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam and



others, he said. The consequences of such actions can lead to profound difficulties and hardships for those involved.

Singh emphasized the need for collective efforts and awareness campaigns. He has advocated for the establishment of a committee or organization that encompasses the religious diversity.

"Such a forum can serve as a platform to foster collaboration and coordinate efforts in raising awareness against the perils of dowry," he said.

*Zaffar Iqbal is a journalist based in Kashmir, India. He has reported for 18 years on armed encounters, environmental issues, crime, politics, culture and human rights. He's formerly the bureau chief of Jammu-Kashmir for NDTV.*

---

## **High Court seeks Maha govt response on Swamy's PIL against Pandharpur Temples Act**

[Hindustan Times](#) (22.08.2023) - The Bombay High Court has asked the Maharashtra government to respond to a public interest lawsuit filed by BJP leader Subramanian Swamy challenging the Pandharpur Temples Act 1973. Swamy claims that the government has taken over the administration of the temples in an arbitrary manner. The government has until September 13 to file its affidavit.

The Bombay high court (HC) on Monday sought the Maharashtra government's reply on a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by BJP leader Subramanian Swamy challenging the Pandharpur Temples Act 1973.

In the petition filed in February this year, Swamy claimed the Maharashtra government had taken over the administration of the Pandharpur town's temples in an arbitrary manner.

A division bench of chief justice DK Upadhyaya and justice Arif S Doctor on Monday directed the government to file its affidavit by September 13 when Swamy's PIL is scheduled to come up for further hearing.

The Maharashtra government had in 2014 invoked the provisions of the act to take over the administration of Vitthal-Rukmini temples at Pandharpur, Solapur district. In the petition filed along with Ghatkopar resident Jagdish Shetty, Swamy has contended that the state government had arbitrarily abolished all hereditary rights and privileges of priestly classes for the governance and administration of the temple.

The petition, filed on February 14 this year, further contended that after the arbitrary takeover, the government has been interfering in the discharge of religious and administrative functions of the temples which is a violation of the right to freedom of religion and that of Article 14 of the Constitution.

Earlier, Swamy had appeared in person and informed the court that as per the Act, the Board would have a perpetual succession and as would have powers to manage and control the administration of the temple.

He had submitted that Article 31 (A) (1) (b) of the Constitution provides the government to take over the management of any property by the state for a limited period either in the public interest or to secure the proper management of the property. However, in the

present case, the takeover since 2014 appears to be in perpetuity and therefore unconstitutional.

The state government had, however, urged the court to not entertain the PIL, as the challenge was belated. Advocate general Birendra Saraf for the state government had earlier submitted that the state government had not acquired the temple as propounded by the petitioner and cited a Supreme Court verdict in support of his contention. "It is an Act of 1973 and SC has said a belated challenge should not be considered," Saraf had submitted.

### ***The Pandharpur Temples Act 1973***

The Lords Vitthal and Rukmini temples had been managed by priests since their inception and there were other individuals known as ministrants who assisted the priests in administering and governing the temples. Due to numerous complaints against the ministrants and their alleged highhandedness, the state government enacted the Pandharpur Temples Act which came into force in 1974. The act gave unbridled and exclusive powers to the government to take over the management of the temples. However, it was invoked only in 2014 and a six-member committee comprising the head of Pandharpur Municipal Council, two MLCs, a woman, and a member each from the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe was constituted. The committee has been overseeing not only the administration and governance of the temples but also presiding over the ritualistic practices.

---

## **Five killed in communal clashes in Haryana State**

***At least five people have been killed and over 70 have been injured after communal clashes broke out in the Nuh district of India's Haryana State on 31 July.***

[CSW](#) (03.08.2023) - The violence began on 31 July after a religious procession organised by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) was interrupted by a group reported to number approximately 15 people who pelted stones at the gathering. Within a few hours, clashes spread across the district, with mobs turning violent. Vehicles, police stations and shops were set ablaze, and at around 5.30pm the Haryana government suspended all mobile SMS and internet services in Nuh in an attempt to stop the spread of misinformation.

By late evening, the violence had spread to neighbouring districts. Anjuman Mosque in Gurugram district was torched by a mob, killing the mosque's 22-year-old cleric Mohammad Saad. The same day, dozens of vehicles outside a Hindu temple where the procession goers had gathered for shelter were torched, leaving more than 2,000 people trapped inside for hours.

On 1 August, the violence spread to Gurugram district where mobs of over 200 people vandalised and torched shops and vehicles. The shops in the area belonged largely to the Muslim community.

As of 1 August, the Haryana Police had registered 44 First Information Reports (FIRs) and arrested more than 80 people in connection with the violence. They have also increased security measures in and around places of religious significance and held meetings with prominent Hindu and Muslim community leaders to restore peace.

Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, which prohibits the assembly of four or more people in an area, has been imposed in several districts including Nuh, Gurugram

and Faridabad. Internet services remain suspended and some schools have been asked to close in violence hit areas. The Deputy Commissioner of Gurugram also issued a statement warning people of strict action if they share any content that could trigger religious disharmony. He also ordered all petrol bunks to stop selling loose petrol as it was being used for violence.

CSW's Founder President Mervyn Thomas said: ***'The spread of communal violence in India's Haryana state is alarming, particularly given the grave events unfolding in Manipur to the north. We call on the Indian government to be proactive in tackling the root causes of communal violence and ensuring due process is followed to secure justice for the victims. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party must do far more to crack down on narratives that drive religious division and intolerance, and which ultimately result in the loss of lives and significant trauma for minority communities.'***

#### **Note to Editors:**

1. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) is the religious arm of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which in turn is the ideological arm of India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

---

## **Tribal Christians protest in poll-bound Indian state**

***Backed by the pro-Hindu groups in Chhattisgarh, a demand is being raised to deny them reservation benefits***

By [Bijay Kumar Minj](#)

**UCA NEWS (12.06.2023) - Tribal Christians in a poll-bound central Indian state have protested against a call to de-list them from India's affirmative action program and deny them reservation benefits.**

Hundreds of tribal Christians on June 10 marched through Raipur, Chhattisgarh state capital, six months ahead of the state elections.

They shouted slogans against some Hindu groups' demand to remove tribal Christians from the list of people receiving reservation benefits in jobs and educational institutions.

Tribal groups, listed as Scheduled tribes, receive such benefits as part of affirmative action to bring them social mainstream.

Certain Hindu groups say tribal people who have become Christians should not be given such benefits as they have left traditional tribal customs and faith.

Anil Kispota, a member of the organizing team, told the media that their "ancestors were tribal, and they continue to remain tribals."

Clad in their traditional attire, they gathered at the Science College ground under the banner of the Chhattisgarh Christian Adivasi Mahasabha (Chhattisgarh Christian tribal forum).

In April this year, the Janjati Suraksha Manch (tribal protection forum) organized a rally in Raipur, demanding that tribal people, "who do not follow the traditions and customs, should be removed from the benefits meant for the Scheduled Tribe (ST) community."

Ram Bhagat, convenor of the forum and a former state minister, expressed the forum's commitment to preserving the culture, customs, languages, traditions, and heritage of its ancestors.

Nearly 98.3 percent of Chhattisgarh's 23 million people are Hindus. Muslims account for 1 percent and Christians, mostly tribal people, account for 0.7 percent.

Kispota said that the call to delist tribal people, who embraced Christianity and other religions, was made with malicious motives to create discord in society.

If tribal Christians are delisted, they lose the benefits which are meant "to uplift their socio-economic condition," Father Nicholas Barla, secretary of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) Commission for Tribal Affairs, told UCA News on June 12.

Delisting tribal people who converted to other religions has assumed political significance as some of the tribal majority regions like the entire northern belt of Sarguja voted en masse for the opposition Congress in the 2018 assembly elections, forcing the current ruling pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to draw a blank.

With the next assembly elections at the end of this year, there is a move towards delisting of converted tribal people to lift the poll prospects of the ruling party.

The Janjati Suraksha Manch (JSM) has been at the forefront of delisting protests. Founded in 2006, the JSM is widely perceived to have the backing of the ruling BJP and its parent organization, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh.

"Tribal people, including Christians, are protesting the move by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), backed by the Janjati Suraksha Manch across India," Father Barla, who hails from the Oraon tribal community, said.

Binay Ekka, an activist from the tribal community, told UCA News on June 12 that "the campaign is an agenda to divide tribal people in the name of caste and religion so that they can control their properties, culture and tradition."

Ekka, a Christian leader, said that "the JSM is against Christian missionaries doing social works among tribal people, accusing them of religious conversion."

Ekka said that once tribal people become minorities they will lose control over village councils that empower tribal people to run their area according to their rules, which is called a scheduled area.

Sunil Minj, another tribal activist based in Raipur, said that delisting has nothing to do with religion but "a conspiracy to take away privileges of the tribal community."

---

## The Hindu festival of Ram Navami sparked anti-Muslim riots across India

By Thais Chaigne

**[The Observers France 24 \(19.04.2023\)](#) - In India, anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence increased across the country on the occasion of a Hindu festival on March 30, 2023. Several videos document the unrest in Vadodara, Gujarat. In a state where communal conflicts have already claimed many lives, our Muslim Observers are concerned about the rise of Hindu nationalism supported by the government.**

In Vadodara, Gujarat, the Hindu festival "Ram Navami", which celebrates the birth of the god Rama, was the scene of violent clashes. Videos posted on Twitter show processions filled with saffron-coloured flags – the symbol of Hindu nationalists – and men throwing stones or cinderblocks at Muslim homes and mosques. They also chanted Hindu nationalist slogans in the city's Muslim neighbourhood.

Shaukat Indori is a lawyer in Vadodara and a member of an Islamic civil rights association. He said that a number of Muslims were wrongfully arrested after the festival.

*"Unfortunately, what happened is that police took action only towards the Muslim community. In the FIR, the first information report, which was lodged by the police department, they mentioned that there was a mob of 500-600 people, Hindu and Muslim. And they quarrelled and stone-pelting took place. But in the FIR, that complaint the police officer made, all the accused are Muslims. Around five women also were arrested by the police department. They were not part of the mob or any part of the stone pelting."*

The scenes of arrests in Vadodara have been described as unjust and abusive by several Muslim community members. A video showing the arrest of a Muslim woman just as she and her family were preparing to break their fast for Ramadan was particularly controversial.

The five women arrested were released on bail on April 14, 2023.

For several years, this Hindu religious festival has been the scene of heated tensions between the Muslim and Hindu communities in Gujarat. So much so that most members of the Muslim community simply do not dare to go out, as Indori explains:

*"It is a celebration of the victory of Ram, Lord Ram according to the Hindu scriptures, but for the last four or five years the way they have been celebrating this Rama Yatra is targeting the Muslim community,*

*Fundamentalist organisations [...] use this festival to teach a lesson or to tease and harass the Muslim community. They want to polarise the whole political scenario. They want to tease and target the Muslim community as an enemy, and they celebrate in this way, not like they celebrate Diwali or other festivals."*

The festival has caused tensions throughout the country, including in Delhi, Bihar and Kashmir.

Gujarat has a history of [violent communal conflict between Muslims and Hindus](#). In 2002, up to 2,000 Muslims were killed in three days of bloody riots in Gujarat, in retaliation for the death of 58 Hindu pilgrims.

Since then, Muslims have been increasingly marginalised and have looked on with concern at the rise of Hindu nationalism in Gujarat and throughout the country.

Minhaz Saiyed (not his real name) is a Muslim man from Gujarat.

*"The 2002 incident has had a very bad impact on the lives of all Muslims in Gujarat. Before that, my family and I lived in a community mixed with Hindus. Then it became too risky, we could be targeted, so we moved to a community where there were only Muslims.*

*Discrimination against Muslims is routine. You don't even have to be religious, I have a name associated with my religion, so people associate me with that. Usually they ask me if I am from Gujarat – because some Hindus say you can't be a Muslim from Gujarat. But I was born and brought up here.*

*[As a Muslim,] I don't feel very safe, it's a bit scary if you ask me. We are supposed to be in a democratic country, but religious fanatics today are taking more and more space in politics.*

*The politicisation of Hinduism worries all religious minorities. In general, religion is becoming really political, and discrimination is increasing."*

The Hindu nationalist party BJP has been India's ruling political party since Narendra Modi became Prime Minister in 2014. The BJP controls 16 of India's 30 regional governments, including that of Gujarat, Modi's home state.

---

## **India's Manipur remains tense weeks after 400 churches were burned, 60 Christians killed**

By Anugrah Kumar

[The Christian Post](#) (21.05.2023) - The northeastern Indian state of Manipur remains in a tense state of unease weeks after a devastating spate of violence led to the deaths of at least 73 individuals, most of them Christians, and the burning, damage or destruction of nearly 400 churches.

Kuldeep Singh, a security advisor to the Manipur Government, told reporters Saturday that 488 weapons and about 6,800 rounds of ammunition looted amid the strife had been retrieved, Ukhurul Times [reported](#).

The Assam Rifles additionally recovered 22 pounds (10 kg) of explosives and 2,000 BIPL detonators.

The largely Christian tribals belonging to the Kuki-Zo communities, who reside on the hills of Churachandpur district, say two groups of the predominantly Hindu Meitei community — Arambai Tengoll, also known as “black-shirts,” and Meitei Leepun — were behind the violence.

Meiteis are primarily settled in the Imphal Valley.

The violence, which began on May 3, primarily engulfed the Imphal Valley and Churachandpur, causing at least four days of turmoil. The region remains fraught with tension as authorities fear possible reprisal attacks due to the significant accumulation of weapons within both involved communities.

The Indian Express earlier [reported](#) that over 1,000 weapons and 10,000 rounds of ammunition were stolen from the Manipur Police Training College, two local police stations, and an IRB battalion camp in Imphal by members of the Meitei ethnic group. The report also noted, without stating specific figures, that police stations in Churachandpur were attacked and looted by the Kuki community.

During this period of hostility, the escalating violence has not only claimed a minimum of 73 lives, out of which about 64 were Christian tribals, but also left 200 people injured. More than 1,700 residences suffered damage, complete destruction or saw their homes set ablaze. The turmoil has forced about 50,000 individuals to abandon their homes, of whom roughly 35,000 belong to Christian tribal communities.

The houses of Meiteis in the Christian tribal-majority Churachandpur have also been damaged or destroyed.

A local source informed The Christian Post that the violence and ensuing tensions have caused a complete exodus of tribal residents from the Imphal Valley. Similarly, all Meiteis previously residing or working in Churachandpur, including government and police officials, have fled the area.

According to the source, Christian organizations in the area have recorded the burning, damage, or destruction of 397 churches and six Christian institutions amid the wave of violence. Significantly, these churches primarily served as places of worship for Meitei Christians. It is alleged that these structures were primarily targeted and destroyed by Meitei Hindus.

Archbishop Dominic Lumon of Imphal, whose jurisdiction covers the entirety of Manipur, has launched an appeal for funds to assist those impacted by the violence. He warns of a “general sense of hopelessness and desperation” throughout the region, acknowledging that all communities, regardless of their affiliation, are affected by the ongoing strife.

Fr. Varghese Velikakam, Vicar General of the Diocese of Imphal, criticized local police for their failure to prevent the attacks and questioned the lack of guards after attempted assaults.

Videos of the violence show police looking on or participating in the violence on tribal people.

Despite the apparent targeted nature of these attacks, Fr. Varghese advised the Church to act cautiously, maintain neutrality and promote peace and unity.

Northeast India has had long-standing ethnic tensions. In Manipur, the Meiteis and the tribal communities have long been at odds over issues such as land ownership and affirmative action policies.

After winning the 2017 state election, the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, led by Chief Minister N. Biren Singh, reclassified the majority of tribal settlements as reserved forests, effectively treating them as illegal immigrants. This move, along with the Meiteis' ongoing quest for recognition as a tribal group, has significantly exacerbated tensions between the two groups.

Manipur's highest court's recent instruction to the government last month to consider the Meiteis' demand for legal recognition as a tribal group has further stirred anxiety among the tribal communities. The recent outbreak of violence was triggered when a tribal student group protested against this demand.

The Hindu Meiteis and Christian tribals each constitute approximately 42% of the state's population. Despite this balance, the Meiteis have historically held dominance in the state's political and economic spheres.

Critics also point to Chief Minister Singh's past orders to demolish churches in Imphal, under the allegation of illegal construction on government-owned land, as a significant strain on inter-community relations.

The widespread violence and targeted attacks against the Christian community have raised concerns about the potential escalation of religious conflict in the region.

As these communities grapple with the aftermath, Manipur remains under a dark cloud of uncertainty, its future dictated by both the government's ability to quell tensions and the communities' willingness to engage in peace-building efforts.

*Photo: An Indian army soldier (R) stands along with villagers in front of a ransacked church that was set on fire by a mob in the ethnic violence hit area of Heiroklian village in Senapati district, in India's Manipur state on May 8, 2023. Around 23,000 people have fled the unrest which erupted last week in the hilly northeast state bordering Myanmar. The latest clashes erupted between the majority Meitei people, who are mostly Hindu, living in and around the Manipur capital Imphal and the mainly Christian Kuki tribe of the hills. | ARUN SANKAR/AFP via Getty Images*

---

## **Two synagogues torched in northeastern state of Manipur**

***Foreign Ministry says Israel watching events closely after ethnic clashes erupt in northeast state of Manipur between religious, tribal communities; MK appeals for coalition's help***

By LAZAR BERMAN and TOI STAFF

[The Times of Israel](#) (05.05.2023) - Members of a small group tracing their heritage to the ancient Israelites and seeking to move to Israel found themselves caught up in violent ethnic clashes in northeastern India this week, when at least one member of the



community was killed, 10 more went missing, and over 200 homes were torched in the state of Manipur.

A father of four from the 5,000-person-strong Bnei Menashe community is known to be dead and 10 others are unaccounted for, a Jewish organization with local volunteers told The Times of Israel on Thursday. Shavei Israel, headed by Michael Freund, is an Israel-based organization that encourages people of Jewish descent to strengthen their connection with Israel and immigrate.

In addition, two synagogues were burned down, and one Torah scroll was torched.

Freund said that at least 210 Bnei Menashe homes were also burnt to the ground. His organization, which is active in northeast India as part of its mission to return "lost" Jews to the fold, is raising money to provide emergency assistance to the community.

The Bnei Menashe are believed to be descended from the biblical tribe of Menashe, one of the Ten Lost Tribes exiled from the Land of Israel more than 2,700 years ago.

In 2005, then-Sephardic chief rabbi Shlomo Amar endorsed the Bnei Menashe's claim to Jewish ancestry but required them to convert to Judaism. Some 5,000 Bnei Menashe have immigrated to Israel in recent years, with another 5,000 or so remaining in India.

The Bnei Menashe victim this week is believed to be one of at least five other people killed in violence that erupted after protests by more than 50,000 Kukis and members of other predominantly Christian tribal communities in Churachandpur and adjoining districts in Manipur state protested against demands by the non-tribal Meitei ethnic community to be included under the government's "Scheduled Tribe" category. Under Indian law, members of such tribes are given reserved quotas for government jobs and college admissions as a form of affirmative action to address structural inequality and discrimination.

After a march on Wednesday by tribal students, unidentified individuals began setting houses on fire leading to spiraling violence.

The Bnei Menashe are part of the Kuki tribal umbrella.

According to Freund, the bulk of the violence is between the Kuki and Meitei, with Bnei Menashe not being specifically targeted.

"It's not traditional antisemitism in the sense that they're not being targeted because they're Jews," he said. At the same time, Freund said that he has received reports from staff on the ground that some Meitei rioters have yelled at them to "go back to Israel where you belong."

Shmuel Suantek, a member of the community living in Manipur, told Ynet he was appealing to Israel for help. "We are begging and asking the Israeli government to bring us now to our country, to Israel," he said.

The Foreign Ministry told the Times of Israel that they were looking into the matter.

National Unity lawmaker Pnina Tamano-Shata, a former minister of immigration and absorption who heads a Bnei Menashe organization in the Knesset, told Ynet that the situation for the Bnei Menashe in Manipur was "very worrying," based on conversations with people on the ground.

"I am in contact with the representatives of the community in Israel and I have appealed to Immigration and Absorption Minister Ofir Sofer [of Religious Zionism], the Prime Minister's Office, and the Jewish Agency to do everything to help and immediately rescue the sons and daughters of the community," she said.

Senior government officials said they were "closely following the events in northeastern India," and that the Foreign Ministry was in contact with the necessary people.

"It is important to emphasize that there is no antisemitic incident there. We need a lot of sensitivity in handling this matter...because it could harm them later on," the unnamed officials said, adding that they were in contact with heads of larger Bnei Menashe communities in Israel including Acre, Nof HaGalil, and Kiryat Arba.

On Thursday, Indian authorities deployed hundreds of military personnel to northeastern Manipur state, bordering Myanmar, and cut off internet services.

"Curfew has been imposed... the situation is tense but is now under control," Awangbow Newmai, a Manipur government minister, told AFP. He confirmed the death toll of six people.

Internet services were also suspended for five days to stop rumors from spreading on social media, according to N. Biren Singh, the state's top elected official.

The army has moved nearly 9,000 people from violence-hit districts to other areas after protesters vandalized shops and businesses, including hotels, and set some homes on fire, said an army officer who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to reporters

The state governor on Thursday issued "shoot at sight orders in extreme cases" to local authorities, allowing district magistrates to shoot protesters.

*Photo: Homes and businesses set on fire in the state of Manipur in northeast India, after clashes erupt between ethnic, religious communities, May 3, 2023. (Twitter video screenshot: used in accordance with Clause 27a of the Copyright Law)*

---

## **Misinformation on India's Muslim population fuels Islamophobia**

[Daily Sabah](#) (02.05.2023) - Indian social media is rife with false demographic data claiming that the country is being turned into a Muslim-majority state, misinformation that influencers have used to cultivate large audiences to spread Islamophobia in the country.

Amit Upadhyay repeats the claim to why India's population is growing: He says his Muslim neighbors are having too many babies, so Hindu women have a responsibility to bear more of their own.

A pharmacist by trade, Upadhyay is one of many social media influencers from India's majority faith to have cultivated large audiences by spreading false demographic data to claim the country is being refashioned into a Muslim-majority state.

For them, last month's announcement that **India had overtaken China** to become the world's most populous nation was not a cause for celebration, but a call to action.

"I tell all my Hindu customers to produce more children, to counter Muslims," Upadhyay, who in his spare time curates a popular Facebook page from his home in Uttar Pradesh state, told the Agence France-Presse (AFP).

"Or else they will become a threat and eventually wipe out the Hindu religion from India."

Upadhyay regularly publishes widely shared Islamophobic posts to his nearly 40,000 followers.

One post in April warned of an alleged plot by Muslims to "multiply their population to take control of India."

India is home to 1.4 billion people, including around 210 million Muslims, but birthrates have declined across the board over recent decades in tandem with global trends.

The country's last National Family Health Survey in 2021 showed an overall fertility rate of 2.0 children per woman, rising marginally to 2.3 for Muslim women.

A forecast issued the same year from the Pew Research Center said that India's Muslim community would grow to 311 million by 2050.

But despite their growing share of the national population, Muslims would remain a small minority in a country of 1.7 billion people by mid-century, according to the U.S.-based think tank's projections.

That has not stopped the spread of viral disinformation on Facebook, WhatsApp and other social media platforms claiming India is soon to become a Muslim-majority country.

One Facebook post sarcastically greeted the news that India's population had overtaken China's by thanking Muslims "for producing 5-10 children" each.

Another post on Twitter claimed that the Hindu faith would soon disappear from India, while a supposed Muslim majority would replace the country's constitution with religious law.

## **Population control**

Conspiracy theories that allege a Muslim plot to secure the faith's numerical supremacy in India have been a staple of Hindu nationalist ideologues for years.

Similar theories of immigrants and minorities "replacing" majority populations have also been embraced by the far-right in other countries.

At times the theories have been indulged by Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which has come to dominate national politics partly through its muscular appeals to the country's Hindu majority.

BJP lawmaker Rakesh Sinha introduced into parliament a population control bill in 2019 that proposed to limit all Indian households to two children, garnering the support of 125 other MPs.

The bill was withdrawn after critics accused Sinha of targeting Muslims when he gave a speech on the supposedly glaring disparity between Hindu and Muslim birthrates – an accusation he denied.

The U.N.'s April announcement that India is now home to more humans than any other country on the planet has reinvigorated these claims.

"Hindus will get married once, and have two children," Ishwar Lal, a member of a [Hindu nationalist group](#) affiliated with the BJP, said in a public speech after the announcement.

"Whereas Muslims get married four times and have so many children that they can have their own cricket teams."

The same month, at a popular pilgrimage destination in the Himalayan foothills, a religious sermon exhorted a crowd of the Hindu faithful to wage their own demographic counteroffensive.

"From two children, Hindus have come down to producing one child," priest Ravindra Puri told a crowd of hundreds at Haridwar. "This is causing an imbalance in the population."

The solution to this imbalance, Puri said, was for the pious to have three children: "One to serve the nation, one to take care of the home and one to serve the religion by becoming a priest."

India's former election chief, S.Y. Quraishi, has written extensively on the spread of disinformation about the country's Muslim birthrate.

He said that claims Muslims would soon become India's majority religion had proved to be a salient "propaganda" tool for Hindu nationalists.

"They continue to provoke Hindus to produce more children by creating a fear that Muslims will outnumber them," he told AFP.

"This will never happen."

---

## Open letter to Josep Borrell, EU Vice-President, on his visit to India

***Open letter on human rights and religious freedom to High Representative/Vice-President of the European Union Josep Borrell on his visit to India. Human Rights Without Frontiers signed it***

March 2, 2023

Mr Josep Borrell

High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission (HR/VP)

European Commission

Rue de la Loi 200

1049 Brussels

### **Open letter on human rights to High Representative/Vice-President of the European Union Josep Borrell on his visit to India**

Dear Mr Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission

As you [visit India](#) from 1 to 4 March, we call upon you to publicly raise concerns about the EU and India's joint commitment to human rights in your engagements. The strategic partnership between the EU and India is rooted in joint values of [human rights](#), as both partners recall their obligation to respect, protect and fulfil human rights of all people. As you work with the international community to promote international security, peace and prosperity, we urge you to recall that this cannot succeed without a firm commitment to human rights.

You are visiting India in the midst of ongoing assaults on human rights, which stand as the "elephant in the room" and must urgently be addressed. Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2020 report](#) ranked India as one of the 'Countries in the Spotlight' for the "deterioration of basic freedoms". Human rights defenders are [systematically persecuted](#), most notably through use of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, India's prime counter-terrorism law which allows the executive to designate individuals as terrorists without due process, and through [planted evidence](#). Religious freedoms are [systematically curtailed](#), and senior members of the ruling BJP have engaged in hate speech and legitimization of violence against religious minorities. This includes sitting Members of Parliament and Ministers, such as [Pragya Thakur](#), [Anurag Thakur](#), [Raja Singh](#), [Yogi Adityanath](#), and [Amit Shah](#).

In 2021, the European Parliament expressed concern at these developments in European Parliament Recommendation [2021/2023\(INI\)](#), and drew the attention of the European Commission towards the crumbling rule of law and human rights situation in India. Additionally, the European Parliament has recently [called](#) on the European External Action Service to prioritise public statements about human rights over diplomacy behind closed doors.

Yet, neither you nor the executive bodies of the EU's foreign policy – the European Commission, the European External Action Service – have publicly condemned or expressed concern about human rights violations in India. Now again, the [agenda](#) made public for your visit does not contain a single mention of human rights, and instead notes

that you will discuss “the bilateral aspects of the strategic partnership and a range of regional and international security issues,” the “green transition”, and “disinformation and cybersecurity”.

We are alarmed about this lack of commitment to human rights, which constitute a foundational element in the EU’s foreign policy. Your silence on human rights is indicative not only of apathy towards human rights in India, but also a sign of the rule of law crisis that the EU is currently undergoing. The EU cannot be shortsighted and compromise on rule of law, human rights and democracy for the sake of staying relevant.

As the High Representative on Foreign Affairs of the European Union, you are obliged to publicly speak on human rights, a founding pillar of the European Union’s foreign policy. We recall that Article 3(5) TEU reads: “In its relations with the wider world, the Union shall [...] contribute to [...] the protection of human rights”, and that Article 21(1) TEU reaffirms: “The Union’s action on the international scene shall be guided by [...] democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity”.

As you attend the G20 Foreign Ministers meetings held in the framework of India’s G20 Presidency, participate in the [Raisina Dialogue](#), and meet with India’s Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, we expect that you will adhere to your legal mandate of promoting human rights. Concretely, it is critical that you publicly express concern about human rights violations in India, and ensure that human rights concerns are discussed in each of your meetings.

Human rights cannot be sacrificed in the name of diplomacy, and the EU must demonstrate an equal commitment to human rights of everyone, everywhere.

### **Signed by**

Stichting The London Story

Aotearoa Alliance of Progressive Indians

Avinash Kumar

Gerard Oonk

Human Rights Without Frontiers

India Civil Watch International

India Labour Solidarity

India Solidarity Germany

International Solidarity for Academic Freedom in India (InSAF India)

Scottish Indians for Justice

South Asia Solidarity Group

The Humanism Project

---

## Concern in Goa as Hindu group storms Catholic college

*The student wing of ruling pro-Hindu party stage a protest and disrupt classes in Goa's St. Xavier's College*

UCA News (25.01.2023) - <https://bit.ly/3HvvsLL> - Church leaders in Goa, a former Portuguese colony in western [India](#), have expressed concern over the ruling pro-Hindu party's push to infiltrate Catholic educational institutions.

"Our Catholic educational institutions are getting more and more communalized," with the backing of the ruling pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) at the state and at federal level, says Jesuit Father Anthony Da Silva, director of Xavier Centre of Historical Research in Goa.

The aim is to push forward the pro-Hindu ideology on Christian educational campuses, the Jesuit priest alleged.

Father Da Silva was particularly referring to a recent incident in which some members of BJP's student wing created tension in the Church-run St. Xavier's College by shouting slogans and disrupting classes. The college comes under the [archdiocese of Goa and Daman](#).

The members of ABVP (Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad or All Indian Students Forum) were protesting the college authorities' refusal to induct the new Student Council in the college after the pro-Hindu students' wing won the council elections held in December for the academic year 2022-23.

It was an "unfortunate and unprecedented incident" in the 60-year-old college, according to Father Tony Salema, the college administrator.

College principal Blanche Mascarenhas refused to meet the unruly protesters and the management asked them to disperse. But protesters refused, forcing the management to call the police.

The protestors also refused to follow police directions, and the college management sought the help of the deputy collector to bring the situation under control, Father Salema said in a statement.

"For the first time, we had a cultural shock with the political sloganeering," said Father Ramiro Luis, assistant professor of psychology at St Xavier's.

More than 2,000 students currently study in the college, set up in 1963, two years after the 450-year Portuguese rule ended in Goa.

Father Victor Ferrao, professor of philosophy at Rachol Seminary of Goa Archdiocese, told UCA News that BJP began to gain political prominence with several legislators, including Catholics, joining the pro-Hindu party in the state recently.

"Now, BJP is using its student wing to show its muscle power and to spread its ideology in Catholic institutions," Father Ferrao, told UCA News.

Father Ferrao said the ruling party was trying to establish a foothold in Christian institutions.

Frederic Noronha, journalist-publisher and former student of St. Xavier's said the BJP was "trying to infiltrate all branches of the administration, including bureaucracy, police, media, and the legal system and educational institutions."

Father Da Silva said the tone was set last year by state Chief Minister Pramod Sawant, who appointed a committee to prepare the list of Hindu temples destroyed by the Portuguese rulers.

The government has set aside a huge amount of money to achieve this aim, the priest said, adding that the diverse activities should be seen in the background of the BJP's proclaimed goal of turning India into a nation of Hindus.

Goa was once considered the center of the Catholic mission in Asia, particularly after the Goa diocese was established in 1533. The diocese at the time had jurisdiction from the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa to China and Japan.

Catholics once dominated Goa's socio-political activities but currently, they form only some 25 percent of the state's estimated 1.5 million people. Hindus are a dominant community forming 65 percent of the population.

Photo: Cardinal Filipe Neri Ferrao, Archbishop of Goa, offers incense during a religious service held during the exposition of the body of St. Francis Xavier in Old Goa, on Nov. 21, 2004. (Photo: AFP)