



Indien (25)

**2000 Annual Report on International Religious Freedom:
India**

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

U.S. Department of State, September 5, 2000



INDIA

The Constitution provides for secular government and the protection of religious freedom, and the central Government generally respects these provisions in practice; however, it sometimes does not act effectively to counter societal attacks against religious minorities and attempts by state and local governments to limit that freedom. This failure results in part from the legal constraints inherent in the country's federal structure, and in part from the demands placed on the at times ineffective law enforcement and justice systems. Ineffective investigation and prosecution of attacks on religious minorities is interpreted by some extremist elements as a signal that such violence is likely to go unpunished.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report.

India is a secular state in which all faiths generally enjoy freedom of worship; government policy does not favor any religious group. However, tensions between Muslims and Hindus, and increasingly, between Hindus and Christians, continue to pose a challenge to the concepts of secularism, tolerance, and diversity on which the State was founded.

The Government is led by a coalition called the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which has pledged to respect India's traditions of secular government and religious tolerance. However, the leading party in the coalition is the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu nationalist political party with links to Hindu extremist groups that have been implicated in violent acts against Christians and Muslims. The BJP also leads state governments in Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. Human rights groups and others have suggested that the response by authorities in these states to acts of violence against religious minorities by Hindu extremist groups has been ineffective, at least in part because of the links between these groups and the BJP, and have noted that the ineffective investigation and prosecution of such incidents may encourage violent actions by extremist groups. Governments at state and local levels only partially respect religious freedom. A number of such governments considered legislation during the period covered by this report that would limit religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government in the context of its overall dialog and policy of promoting human rights.



Section I. Government Policies on Freedom of Religion

Legal/Policy framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. There are no registration requirements for religions. Legally mandated benefits are assigned to certain groups, including some groups defined by their religion.

There are many religions and a large variety of denominations, groups, and subgroups in the country, but Hinduism is the dominant religion. Under the Constitution, the Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh faiths are considered different from the Hindu religion, but the Constitution often is interpreted as defining Hinduism to include the Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh faiths. This interpretation has been a contentious issue, particularly among the Sikh community.

Religious Demography

According to 1999 government statistics (based on the 1991 national census), Hindus constitute 82.4 percent of the population, Muslims 12.7 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, Sikhs 2 percent, Buddhists 0.7 percent, Jains 0.4 percent, and others, including Parsis, Jews, and Baha'is, 0.4 percent. Hinduism has a large number of branches, including the Sanatan and Arya Samaj groups. Slightly over 90 percent of the Muslims are Sunni; the rest are Shi'a. Buddhists include followers of the Mahayana and Hinayana schools, and there are both Catholic and Protestant Christians. Tribal groups, which for the sake of government statistics generally are included among Hindus, often practice traditional indigenous religions. Hindus and Muslims are spread throughout the country, although large Muslim populations are found in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala, and Muslims are a majority in Jammu and Kashmir. Christian concentrations are found in the northeastern states, as well as in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Three small northeastern states have large Christian majorities--Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya. Sikhs are a majority in the state of Punjab. In January 1999, the previous National Commission for Minorities (NCM) chairman Tahir Mahmoud announced that the NCM had recommended that Hindus be declared minorities in six states--Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Nagaland; this would help the NCM to take cognizance of the problems of Hindus in those states. As of mid-2000 the Government still was considering the proposal; however, it had not gone into effect.

Over the years, lower castes and Dalits (formerly called "untouchables") (see Section II) frequently have converted to other faiths because they viewed conversion as a means to achieve higher social status. Dalit leaders frequently have encouraged their followers to convert to Buddhism, Christianity, and other faiths without a caste tradition. Yet lower caste and Dalit converts continue to be viewed by both their coreligionists and Hindus through the prism of caste. Converts are

widely regarded as belonging to the caste of their ancestors.

Animosities within and between religious communities in India have roots that are centuries old, and these tensions--at times exacerbated by poverty, class, and ethnic differences--have erupted into periodic violence throughout the country's 53-year history. The Government makes some effort to prevent these incidents and to restore communal harmony when such incidents occur, but these efforts are not entirely successful. The Government has taken steps to promote interfaith understanding, which include the creation of the National Integration Council (in 1962 as a non-statutory body with an objective of maintaining social tranquility and communal harmony), the National Commission for Minorities (as a non-statutory body in 1978 and statutorily by Parliament act in 1992), and the National Human Rights Commission (founded by an act of Parliament in 1993).

Governmental Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Act makes it an offense to use any religious site for political purposes or to use temples for harboring persons accused or convicted of crimes. While specifically designed to deal with Sikh places of worship in Punjab, the law applies to all religious sites. In addition the state of Uttar Pradesh passed the "Religious Buildings and Places Bill" during the State Assembly Budget Session of March-May 2000. The bill requires a state government-endorsed permit before construction of any religious building could begin in the state. The bill's supporters say that its aim is to curb the use of Muslim institutions by Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups, but the measure has become a controversial political issue among all religious groups in northern India. Also during the period covered by this report, West Bengal's government decided to implement 15-year-old legislation that required any person desiring to construct a place of worship to seek permission from the district magistrate; anyone intending to convert a personal place of worship to one for the community also requires the district magistrate's permission.

The current legal system accommodates minority religions' personal status laws; there are different personal laws for different religious communities. Religion-specific laws pertain in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance. For example, Muslim personal status law governs many noncriminal matters involving Muslims, including family law, inheritance, and divorce.

The personal status laws of the religious communities sometimes discriminate against women. Under Islamic law, a Muslim husband may divorce his wife spontaneously and unilaterally; there is no such provision for women. Islamic law also allows a man to have up to four wives but prohibits polyandry. Under the Indian Divorce Act of 1869 a Christian woman may demand divorce only in the case of spousal abuse and certain categories of adultery; for a Christian man, a wife's adultery alone is sufficient.

The Government currently is reviewing the legislation on marriage and

drafted the "Christian Marriage Bill" in early 2000. The bill would replace the Indian Divorce Act of 1869 (sic), which is widely criticized as biased against women. If enacted it would place limitations on interfaith marriages and specify penalties, such as 10 years imprisonment, for clergymen who contravene its provisions. The current form of the bill states that no marriage in which one party is a non-Christian may be celebrated in a church. The bill was not introduced during the most recent Parliament session in March-May 2000 due to the strong objections and reservations of the Christian community.

There is no national law that bars proselytizing by Christian citizens. Foreign missionaries generally can renew their visas, but since the mid-1960's the Government has refused to admit new resident foreign missionaries. New arrivals currently enter as tourists on short-term visas. As of January 1993 (more current figures are not available), there were 1,923 registered foreign Christian missionaries. During the period covered by this report, as in the past, state officials refused to issue permits for foreign Christian missionaries to enter some northeastern states. This restriction is not specifically levied against Christians--many foreigners, including diplomats, are refused permits to the country's northeast on the grounds of political instability in the region. In September 1999, the Government's Ministry of Home Affairs ordered a 57-year-old American priest to leave the country. This individual, Father Anthony Raymond Ceresko, a teacher at a seminary in Bangalore, entered the country in 1991 and had been able to renew his residence permit every year until 1999. Ceresko left the country on September 17, 1999. In addition to foreign missionaries, several Christian relief organizations have been hampered by bureaucratic obstacles in getting visas renewed for foreign relief work.

Missionaries and religious organizations must comply with the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which restricts funding from abroad and, therefore, the ability of certain non-governmental organizations (NGO's) to finance their activities. The Government is empowered to ban a religious organization if it has violated the FCRA, has provoked intercommunity friction, or has been involved in terrorism or sedition. There is no ban on professing or propagating religious beliefs, but speaking publicly against other beliefs is considered dangerous to public order, and is prohibited.

The BJP, which has led two coalition national governments since March 1998, is one of a number of offshoots of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh (RSS), an organization that espouses a return to Hindu values and cultural norms. Members of the BJP, the RSS, and other affiliated organizations have been implicated in incidents of violence and discrimination against Christians and Muslims. The BJP and RSS express respect and tolerance for other religions; however, the RSS in particular opposes conversions from Hinduism and believes that all citizens should adhere to Hindu cultural values. The BJP officially agrees that the caste system should be eradicated, but many of its members are ambivalent about this. Most BJP leaders, including Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee and Home Minister L.K. Advani, also are RSS members, as are the chief ministers of the state governments in Uttar

Pradesh, Gujarat, and Himachal Pradesh. The BJP's traditional cultural agenda has included calls for construction of a new Hindu temple to replace an ancient Hindu temple that was believed to have stood on the site of a mosque in Ayodhya that was destroyed by a Hindu mob in 1992; for the repeal of Article 370 of the Constitution, which grants special rights to the state of Jammu and Kashmir, India's only Muslim majority state; and for the enactment of a uniform civil code that would apply to members of all religions. All of these proposals are opposed strongly by some minority religious groups.

While the BJP at the national level has not included its traditional agenda items in the program of government of the coalition Government it leads, some Christian groups have noted the coincidence of its coming to power and an increase in complaints of discrimination against minority religious communities. These groups also claim that BJP officials at state and local levels have become increasingly unresponsive in investigating charges of religious discrimination and in prosecuting those persons responsible.

The degree to which the BJP's nationalist Hindu agenda is felt throughout the country with respect to religious minorities varies depending on the region. State governments continue to attach a high priority to maintaining law and order and monitoring intercommunity relations at the district level. The four southern states are ruled by political parties with strong secular and prominority views. Each of these parties--the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu, the Telugu Desam Party (TDP) in Andhra Pradesh, the Communist Party in Kerala, and the Congress Party in Karnataka--has a history of support for religious minorities and has attempted to assuage religious minority fears about religious tension in the rest of the country. Such fears were aroused when the DMK and TDP entered the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) with the BJP during the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. However, both parties subsequently took pains to reaffirm their commitment to secularism and to allay apprehensions from their religious minority supporters.

The southern branches of the BJP generally take a more moderate position on minority issues, but religious groups in the region still allege that since the BJP's rise to power in the national Government, some government bureaucrats have begun to enforce laws selectively to the detriment of religious minorities. The groups cite numerous examples of discrimination, such as biased interpretations of postal regulations, including removal of postal subsidies; refusals to allocate land for the building of churches; and heightened scrutiny of NGO's to ensure that foreign contributions are made according to the law. In August 1999, the Union Home Ministry banned the biennial meeting of the International Anglican Liturgical Consultation in Kottayam, Kerala, after organizers neglected to seek Home Ministry permission to hold the conference. Also, Muslim leaders in Hyderabad allege that Hindu extremists in the Andhra Pradesh police force have harassed Muslim youth and students at religious schools under the pretext of investigating plots by the ISI, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (intelligence service).

The eastern part of the country presented a varied picture with regard to religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and the political leanings of the state governments in the eastern region did not appear to correlate with the level of protection for religious freedom. In Orissa, which has acquired notoriety for violence against religious minorities (particularly after the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young children there in January 1999), the communal situation remained relatively unchanged during the period covered by this report, despite the installation of a BJP-Biju Janata Dal (BJD) government in February 2000. The Orissa government in November 2000 notified churches that religious conversions could not take place without notifying the local police and district magistrate. The Orissa Freedom of Religion Act of 1967 contains a provision requiring a monthly government report on the number of conversions, but this provision previously had not been enforced. (After a conversion has been reported to the District Magistrate, the report is forwarded to the authorities and a local police officer conducts an inquiry. The police officer can recommend in favor of or against such intended conversion, often as the sole arbitrator on the individual's right to freedom of religion; if conversion is judged to have taken place without permission or with coercion, the authorities may take penal action.) In West Bengal, Marxist rulers could not prevent reconversions of religious minorities by Hindus in some districts. Bihar was peaceful with regard to religious minorities with the exception of two seemingly unrelated events in September 1999. The assault of a nun by 2 young men because of her religion was followed on September 24, 1999 by a silent protest staged by nuns in Patna against the deletion of the names of 150 nuns and 5 priests from voters' lists. In Tripura there were several cases of reverse persecution of non-Christians by Christian members of the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT), a militant tribal group that often is evangelical. For example, NLFT tribal insurgents have banned Hindu and Muslim festivals in areas that they control, cautioned women not to wear traditional Hindu tribal attire, and banned indigenous forms of worship. In Assam, where the number of Muslims is increasing rapidly, the issue of Bangladeshi migrants (who generally are Muslim) has become exceedingly sensitive among the Assamese (predominantly Hindu) population, which feels increasingly outnumbered.

In the west, mostly in Gujarat, incidents of intercommunity strife continued; however, there were fewer incidents than occurred in December 1998 and January 1999. There were no major outbreaks of violence and no instances where the state government was perceived as supporting or tolerating actions aimed against religious minorities. On May 14, 2000, the Gujarat and national governments pledged to protect religious minorities; Union Home Minister L.K. Advani said that if any "untoward incidents" occurred, the Government would not spare those responsible. However, there were few arrests or convictions in connection with violent incidents against religious minorities. Leaders of several Hindu nationalist organizations in Gujarat alleged that the state's government was, in fact, being very harsh on Hindus and was placating Muslims whenever Hindu-Muslim skirmishes broke out.

A January 2000 decision by the Gujarat state government to revoke the ban on the participation of government employees in RSS activities was widely criticized, as was the well-publicized participation of the state's chief minister at an RSS rally that month. In May 2000, the government of Gujarat withdrew permission for state government workers to engage in RSS activities. In March 2000, the government of Gujarat convinced a BJP legislator to withdraw a bill that sought to regulate Christian missionary activity within the state; the bill was written to prohibit "forced" or "induced" conversions--a crime that would have been punishable by a fine and up to 3 years in prison. Despite these steps by the state and national governments to address communal concerns, many in the minority communities continued to express unease about BJP rule.

In the north, there were several incidents in April 2000 in which Hindu groups attacked Christian institutions (see Section II). These incidents were the first signs of Hindu-Christian clashes in Uttar Pradesh in over 6 years. The Government dispatched the NCM to investigate the attacks in the north, but the NCM's findings that the attacks were not "communal in nature" sparked widespread criticism in the minority community (see Section II). There is strong evidence that the NCM report misrepresented the victims in its claims that they themselves are entirely satisfied that there was no religious motivation behind the violence. Victims of the incidents claim that the local police were not responsive either before or during the attacks. No arrests were made as of mid-2000. Christian groups in the north believe that these incidents were religiously motivated. Religious minorities in the north claim that they have seen a deterioration in the Government's attitude toward the minority community since the BJP assumed power in 1998, and they are concerned that attacks on religious minorities no longer appear to be confined to Gujarat and Orissa.

On June 26, 2000 the National Human Rights Commission ordered affected states to provide written reports detailing the violence against Christians and the actions taken by state governments.

Governmental Abuses of Religious Freedom

Jammu and Kashmir, the country's only Muslim majority state, has been the focus of repeated armed conflict between India and Pakistan, and internally between security forces and Muslim militants who demand that the state be given independence or be ceded to Pakistan. Particularly since an organized insurgency erupted in Jammu and Kashmir in 1989, there have been numerous reports of human rights abuses carried out by the security forces and local officials against the Muslim population, including execution-style killings, beatings, and other forms of physical abuse. Many of the charges of government responsibility for massacres of civilians lack credibility; however, significant evidence emerged in August 1999 about the Government's earlier role in the killing of 19 Muslims in Saalan village of Poonch district on August 4, 1998. An investigation by the chief minister revealed that the state and federal governments had created an overall

infrastructure that specifically included individuals with the demonstrated capacity and attitude to commit such acts of violence. It is not clear to what extent the actions of the Government and security forces were based on religion.

In Uttar Pradesh on June 10, 2000, Vijay Ekka, a witness to the killing of Catholic priest Brother George Kuzhikandum, died in police custody. Ekka initially was placed under police protection because it was believed that there was a risk of reprisals against him by members of the Hindu community. His death drew serious criticism from human rights organizations and minority communities nationwide. Archbishop Vincent Concessao of Agra said Ekka's body showed signs of torture, and said police had told church authorities that Ekka had committed suicide. While in detention, Ekka told visitors that he was being tortured constantly in police custody, and said he was afraid police would kill him. The state government initiated an investigation into Ekka's death on June 17, 2000, and a few days later announced plans to establish a judicial inquiry. The Mathura superintendant of police was transferred and two policemen were arrested in connection with the incident.

Nationwide there was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report. Although the law provides for religious freedom, enforcement of the law has been poor, particularly at the state and local levels, where the failure to deal adequately with intragroup and intergroup conflict and with local disturbances has abridged the right to religious freedom. Some Hindu groups continued to attack Christians during the period covered by this report. In many cases, the Government's response consisted largely of statements criticizing the violence against Christians, with few efforts to hold accountable those persons responsible or to prevent such incidents from occurring (see Section II). A federal political system in which state governments hold jurisdiction over law and order problems contributed to the Government's ineffectiveness in dealing with the problem. India's only national law enforcement agency, the Central Bureau of Investigation, is required to ask state government permission before investigating a crime in the affected state. Without such jurisdiction, the Government generally has described the violence and attacks as a series of isolated local phenomena, in some states calling for a national debate on conversions, which Hindus had advocated being banned.

Forced Religious Conversion of Minor U.S. Citizens

There were no reports of the forced religious conversion of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the Government's refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Section II. Societal Attitudes

During the period covered by this report, attacks on religious minorities occurred in several states.

India's caste system generates severe tensions due to disparities in social

status, economic opportunity, and, occasionally, labor rights. These tensions frequently have led to, or exacerbated, violent confrontations and human rights abuses. However, for the most part intercaste violence does not have a significant religious component.

The country's caste system historically has strong ties to Hinduism. It delineates clear social strata, assigning highly structured religious, cultural, social roles, privileges, and restrictions to each caste and subcaste. Members of each caste--and frequently each subcaste--are expected to fulfill a specific set of duties (known as dharma) in order to secure elevation to a higher caste through rebirth. Dalits are viewed by many Hindus as separate from or "below" the caste system; nonetheless, they too are expected to follow their dharma if they hope to achieve caste in a future life. Despite efforts by modern leaders from Mahatma Gandhi's time forward to eliminate the discriminatory aspects of caste, societal, political, and economic pressures continue to ensure its widespread practice (see Section I). Caste today therefore is as much a cultural and social phenomenon as a religious one.

The Constitution gives the President the authority to specify historically disadvantaged castes, Dalits, and "tribals" (members of indigenous groups historically outside the caste system). These "scheduled" castes, Dalits, and tribes are entitled to affirmative action and hiring quotas in employment, benefits from special development funds, and special training programs. The impact of reservations and quotas on society and on the groups they are designed to benefit is a subject of active debate within the country. Some contend that they have achieved the desired effect and should be modified, while others strongly argue that they should be continued, as the system has not addressed adequately the long-term discriminatory impact of caste. According to the 1991 census, scheduled castes, including Dalits, made up 16 percent and scheduled tribes 8 percent of the country's 1991 population of 846 million.

Christians historically have rejected the concept of caste, despite the fact that Christians descended from low caste Hindu families continue to suffer the same social and economic limitations that low caste Hindus do. Low caste Hindus who convert to Christianity lose their eligibility for affirmative action programs. Those who become Buddhists, Jains, or Sikhs do not, as the Constitution groups members of those faiths with Hindus and specifies that the Constitution shall not affect "the operation of any existing law or prevent the state from making any law providing for social welfare and reform" of these groups. In some states, there are government jobs reserved for Muslims of low caste descent.

In the past, Hindu-Muslim violence has led to killings and a cycle of retaliation. In some instances, local police and government officials abetted the violence, and at times security forces were responsible for abuses. Excluding incidents in Kashmir, there was a decline in the number of incidents of Hindu-Muslim violence during the period covered by this report. On August 26, 1999, a mob of approximately 15 persons mutilated and burned to death a Muslim cattle trader in Padiabeda village, Orissa. According to press reports, men with bows and arrows and axes attacked the cattle trader. He was thrown into his

shop, which had been set ablaze. On January 30, 2000, Muslim and Hindu crowds clashed and threw stones at each other in Bangalore after an idol was desecrated in a Hindu temple. No one was killed, but the police quickly banned public assemblies of more than three persons (the ban since has been lifted).

Hindus and Muslims continue to feud over the existence of mosques constructed several centuries ago on three sites where Hindus believe that temples stood previously. The potential for renewed Hindu-Muslim violence remains considerable. On July 20, 1999, violence erupted between Hindus and Muslims in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, and one person died. The violence began when a band of Hindu youths set fire to Muslim shops and vehicles after encountering some Muslim youths teasing a mentally disabled woman in the Muslim-dominated old city. Police responded by declaring an area-wide curfew, thereby bringing the rioting under control; however, there was renewed communal violence on July 22, 1999, when the curfew was lifted.

Attacks by Muslim separatists seeking to end Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir, and continued political violence, drove most Hindus in the Kashmir Valley (Pandits) to seek refuge in camps in Jammu, with relatives in New Delhi, or elsewhere. Throughout the period covered by this report, militants carried out several execution-style mass killings of Hindu villagers and violently targeted Pandits for violence in Jammu and Kashmir. For example, it is believed that on July 1, 1999, a group of Muslims killed nine members of two Hindu families, including three women and a child, in Poonch district, Jammu and Kashmir. The Pandit community fears that a negotiated solution giving greater autonomy to the Muslim majority might threaten its own survival in Jammu and Kashmir as a culturally and historically distinctive group.

On March 20, 2000, 17 unidentified gunmen in army uniforms killed 35 Sikh men in the village of Chatti Singhpora (near Anantnag in south Kashmir). The incident was the largest single massacre of civilians during the past 11 years of militancy and the only mass killing in Kashmir to have involved the Sikh community. The evidence suggests that Muslim separatists dressed in army uniforms carried out the killings. No arrests have been reported. The massacre of Sikhs was preceded by several massacres of Hindus in the area. During the early morning hours of July 20, 1999, approximately 20 persons entered two houses in the Doda district of Jammu region and used automatic weapons to kill 15 persons, including 3 women and 7 children. The group, identified by a survivor as belonging to Hizbul-Mujahideen, were targeting specifically five men in the house who were members of their local village defense committee. Also on July 20, 1999, in the Poonch district of Jammu region, militants killed four members of a government road engineering group. The four victims were all non-Muslims from outside Jammu and Kashmir. The July 20, 1999, massacres were the fourth in a series of incidents during the summer of 1999.

The period covered by this report was preceded in 1998 and early 1999 by a serious outbreak of societal violence against Christians, apparently sparked by rumors of "forced conversions" of Hindus to Christianity. In

Orissa, Dara Singh (a member of the Hindu extremist Bajrang Dal) was arrested on January 31, 2000 for murdering Graham Staines and his two young sons in January 1999. He also was charged with the killings of another Christian and a Muslim. Singh remains a popular figure among Hindu extremists, many of whom apparently helped him evade arrest for over a year. Several of Singh's associates also have been arrested and charged. The Wadhwa Commission established to probe into the Staines murder presented its findings in August 1999, confirming that Dara Singh masterminded the killing but it effectively exonerating Hindu organizations and political parties that had been accused of complicity. Some Christian groups criticized the Commission's findings as a coverup.

Between March and November 1999, in the wake of the Staines murder, five families in Orissa's tribal belt that previously had embraced Christianity reportedly reconverted to Hinduism. On June 2, 2000, a Hindu priest reportedly reconverted 72 tribal Christians in the same village where Graham Staines and his sons were killed. In West Bengal in February 2000, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) reportedly reconverted 245 tribals, mostly Christians, in Birbhum district to Hinduism. According to the VHP's chief organizer in West Bengal, Asit Bhattacharya, 42 tribal Christians were reconverted in 1999 in Malda district and 280 Muslims in Murshidabad. He said that the state government would not stop reconversions of non-Hindus who were willing to return to the Hindu fold. In Arunachal Pradesh, alleged pressure from Hindus to reconvert tribals back to Hinduism has led to increased tension between Hindus and Christians. Members of Hindu organizations (including members of the Hindu Jagran Manch, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Bajrang Dal) are concerned about Christians' efforts to convert Hindus. They claimed that Hindus, including economically disadvantaged Dalits and tribals, were being forced or induced to convert by Christian missionaries; in some cases, Hindus allegedly have reconverted, at times by force or threat of force, tribals and Dalits belonging to other religions. However, many tribals follow traditional religious practices, and many Christian tribals were not Hindu prior to becoming Christian, even though they often are counted by the Government and others as Hindu. On September 6, 1999, Vishwa Hindu Parishad working president Ashok Singhal called for enactment of a law banning forced conversions.

Christian missionaries have been operating schools and medical clinics for many years in tribal areas. Tribals and Dalits are outside of the caste system and occupy the very lowest position in the social hierarchy. However, they have made socioeconomic gains as a result of the missionary schools and other institutions, which, among other things, have increased literacy among the lowest castes. Some higher caste Hindus tend to resent these gains. Some fault the missionaries for the resulting disturbance in the traditional Hindu social order as better educated Dalits, tribals, and members of the lower castes no longer accept their disadvantaged status as readily as they once did.

During the period covered by this report, there were fewer but more geographically widespread incidents of anti-Christian violence. There

were attacks against Christian communities and Christian missionaries by Hindu groups in many areas, including some that previously had not seen such violence. These attacks, primarily in the form of mob violence, included the destruction of churches and religious property, as well as violent attacks on Christian pilgrims and leaders. From July 1, 1999 to June 30, 2000, incidents of violence against Christians were reported in Tamil Nadu, Goa, Punjab, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Haryana, Orissa, West Bengal, Bihar, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh. For example, on September 2, 1999, Father Arul Doss, a 35-year-old Roman Catholic priest, was killed in a night raid by Dara Singh-led Hindu groups on a church in Jambani village in Orissa's Mayurbhanj district. Doss was pulled from the church, shot with arrows, and beaten to death by his assailants. The mob also severely beat Doss's associate and vandalized the one-room church, before setting it on fire. In a public statement the same day, Prime Minister Vajpayee strongly criticized Father Doss's murder and called for its perpetrators to be brought to justice. On September 20, 1999, in Chapra, Bihar, two young men attacked a Roman Catholic nun; they reportedly questioned her about the number of conversions she and other nuns had made at Jalalpur convent. The men reportedly stripped the nun, forced her to drink urine, and attempted to rape her. Bihar Police Chief K.A. Jacob visited the scene of the crime 3 days later, and the state government established a three-member committee to investigate the crime. There were no reports of progress in the investigation of this case.

On November 11, 1999, a group of about 40 persons attacked a Christian gathering outside a church in the Khyala area of Delhi, in the first such incident in the capital. At least 12 persons were injured in the attack, when the group descended on an open-air Bible reading session, allegedly tearing pamphlets and damaging two Bibles. A police spokesman said the group "may have had some BJP activists" and four persons that are suspected of instigating the attacks were being sought.

There was a series of incidents in Uttar Pradesh in April 2000. On April 6, 2000, an angry group, demanding a decrease in school fees and an increase in the number of passing students, harassed the principal of Sacred Heart School in Mathura. The principal disputed an allegation that the harassment was because of school fees, saying she was harassed and chased by a group of young men (not parents of students) who also asked her questions relating to what religious texts were read at the school. On April 10, 2000, Father Joseph Dabre, principal of St. Dominic's School in Mathura, was beaten by six young men who went to the school on the pretext of a question about admissions. On April 11, 2000, in Kosi Kalan near Mathura, 8 to 10 assailants attacked Father K. K. Thomas at St. Theresa's school when he rushed to the assistance of a servant girl and 3 nuns whom the assailants were attacking. The culprits also stole equipment and cash. Thomas was beaten unconscious and left for dead by his attackers, who were not found.

Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee asked for a detailed report on the incidents in the Mathura area from Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Ram Prakash Gupta. State officials also ordered police to keep watch over churches, missionary centers, and other places of worship after the

attacks near Mathura. On April 26, 2000, the NCM visited the sites of these attacks at Sacred Heart School, St. Dominic's School, and St. Theresa's School, and issued a report on April 27, 2000. The report, which claimed that the Sacred Heart case had "no communal tinge," and that the Kosi Kalan case was a "case of robbery and nothing else," was criticized widely by the minority community. The validity of the report was questioned openly by several members of the Lok Sabha (Lower House of Parliament), and victims of the attacks claimed that they were misquoted in the report. These attacks on Christians in Uttar Pradesh were the first in the state in 6 years.

Following the violence in April 2000 in the vicinity of Mathura, on June 7, 2000, a Catholic priest, Brother George Kuzhikandum, was killed on the campus of Brother Polus Memorial School near Mathura. On June 10, 2000, Vijay Ekka, a witness to the killing of Brother George, died in police custody (see Section I).

In northern Punjab state, in June 2000, the Rev. Ashish Prabash Masih, age 23, reportedly was murdered and his body burned. While police ruled out any communal undertones, the Punjab Christian Association stated that the murder was part of a concerted campaign against its community by Hindu nationalists.

In April 2000, three nuns said that they were run down deliberately by a motor scooter in the northern Indian state of Haryana on their way to a midnight Easter Mass. One of the nuns was injured seriously. The Christian Forum stated that the attack was the fifth on nuns and priests in Haryana in the year, but both the National Commission for Minorities and the Catholic Bishop's Conference stated that the incident could have been an accident.

On May 9, 2000, in Maharashtra, approximately 150 suspected activists of the Bajrang Dal and the VHP attacked the 45th annual convention of the Evangelical Alliance Christian Church and the Nashik District Church Council, set fire to three vehicles, and ransacked a bus carrying religious literature. Four persons were hospitalized. Rural police said that they arrested 33 persons, all of whom belonged to Bajrang Dal or VHP. Although political leaders from Maharashtra's ruling party denounced the attack, the minister of state for dairy development created a stir when he joined a group of BJP, RSS, and VHP activists who went to meet and congratulate the accused when they were released from jail on bail.

On May 12, 2000 in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, assailants threw stones and tried to set fire to one church, while vandalizing two other churches.

In November 1999, in Anekal, a small village in Karnataka, a group of Hindus allegedly attacked Selva Kumar, a Catholic seminary student, and stabbed him in the neck. The attackers accused him of trying to convert Dalits to Christianity. In November 1999, a group of Hindu and Muslim students from St. Joseph's Evening College in Bangalore, Karnataka, was attacked by suspected Hindu members who accused them of converting villagers in Anekal.

Tamil Nadu was the scene of multiple church burnings between September 30 and November 12, 1999. During this 6-week period, nine thatched-roof buildings used for worship services by the Church of South India (a member of the Anglican Communion), the Syrian Catholic Church, the Methodist Church, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, the International Evangelist Church, and various Pentecostal denominations were burned down; no one was killed. Police arrested a few individuals in connection with the fires, but the disposition of these cases is not known.

The burning of churches continued in the first half of 2000. For example, on May 12, 2000, a hut used as a prayer cottage by Christians in Katiguda village was burned by what the local police referred to as "anti-socials." On May 16, 2000, a cottage in Dharakote village used as a place of congregation for local Christians was set on fire. Armed police officers were deployed in the area, but no arrests thus far have been made.

On June 8, 2000, bombs exploded in four churches in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Goa. The blasts occurred in a Baptist church in Ongole, Andhra Pradesh; a Catholic church in Tadepalligudem, Andhra Pradesh; a Catholic church in Wadi, Karnataka; and a church in Vasco, Goa. The bombs reportedly blew out windows and damaged pews; three persons in Ongole and two in Wadi received minor injuries. During the last week of June 2000, a mosque in Gunter, Andhra Pradesh was bombed. None of the localities had a history of serious communal tensions before the blasts. In Karnataka police patrols reportedly were increased at all places of worship, and a special investigative unit was formed to investigate the bombings. By June 20, 2000, nine persons reportedly were arrested in connection with the blasts in Andhra Pradesh, including a leading member of a Shi'a Muslim organization. On May 5, 2000, six missionaries who were distributing Bibles and other literature in Vivekanandnagar, Ahmedabad, suffered a severe beating. Some evangelists and some Bajrang Dal activists came to blows in this locality when the Bajrang Dal activists forbade distribution of Christian literature. Both the groups filed complaints against each other in the police station about being beaten up. A Hindu bystander who tried to intervene had his finger chopped off, according to newspaper reports. On May 22, 2000, 30 persons were injured when a powerful bomb exploded during a Christian meeting at Machlipatnam in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh.

Referring to the rash of attacks against Christians over the first 6 months of 2000, the National Human Rights Commission expressed its concern at the upsurge of violence faced by Christians, and demanded that the Government announce the steps that it was taking to protect the Christian community.

Other incidents affecting religious minorities during the period covered by this report occurred in Tripura, where Christian militants have imposed bans on Hindu and Muslim festivals, and in Assam, where Hindu concern over the continued influx of illegal Muslim immigrants

from Bangladesh has grown over the past year.

The practice of dedicating or marrying young, prepubescent girls to a Hindu deity or temple as "servants of god" or "Devadasis," is reported by Human Rights Watch to continue in several southern states, including Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Devadasis, who generally are Dalits, may not marry. They are taken from their families and are required to provide sexual services to priests and high caste Hindus. Reportedly, many eventually are sold to urban brothels. In 1992 the state of Karnataka passed the Karnataka Devadasi (Prohibition) Act and called for the rehabilitation of Devadasis, but this law reportedly is not enforced effectively and criminalizes the actions of Devadasis. Since Devadasis are by custom required to be sexually available to higher caste men, it reportedly is difficult for them to obtain justice from the legal system if they are raped by anyone.

Despite the incidents of violence and discrimination during the period covered by this report, relations between various religious groups generally are amicable among the substantial majority of citizens. There are efforts at ecumenical understanding that bring religious leaders together to defuse religious tensions. The annual Sarva Dharma Sammelan (All Religious Convention) and Mushairas (Hindu-Urdu poetry sessions) held on many occasions are some events that help bring the various communities together. The holidays of Eid Milan, Holi Mila, and Iftar are occasions for Hindus and Muslims to celebrate at parties together, and are important social events that promote communal harmony. After episodes of violence against Christians, Muslim groups have protested against the treatment of Christians by Hindu extremists. Hundreds of non-Christians joined Christians in the streets of New Delhi in June 2000 to mourn the sudden loss of Archbishop Alan de Lastic after his death in a car accident in Europe.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Mission continued to promote religious freedom through contact with the country's senior leadership, as well as with state and local officials. The U.S. Embassy and Consulates regularly report on events and trends that affect religious freedom.

During his state visit to India, President Clinton spoke about the massacre of Sikhs in Kashmir on March 20, 2000, and called for an end to the violence. In August and September 1999, the U.S. Consul in Chennai expressed concern about the status of Father Ceresko's visa application to the chief secretary of Karnataka and regarding the cancellation of the conference of the Anglican Church (see Section I) to Kerala state government officials. In January 2000, Senator Tom Daschle's delegation raised the issue of religious minorities with Home Minister L.K. Advani during a visit to New Delhi. In February 2000, a representative of the State Department discussed minorities issues with the National Human Rights Commission in New Delhi. On June 23, 2000 the U.S. Ambassador noted to the press that attacks against Christians are a serious concern.

Embassy officials meet with religious officials to monitor religious freedom on a regular basis. U.S. Mission officers traveled to Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh during the period covered by this report to assess the situation of religious minorities in those states. Embassy and consulate officials also engaged with important leaders of all minority communities. The U.S. mission maintains contacts with U.S. residents, including those in the NGO and missionary communities. The NGO community in the country is extremely active with regard to religious freedom, and mission officers meet with local NGO's to keep apprised of developments concerning religious freedom.

[end of document]

[East Asia, South Asia, and the Pacific Index](#) | [Table of Contents](#) | [International Religious Freedom](#) | [Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) |