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U.S. Department of State Annual Report on International Religious Freedom for 1999: India

Released by the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor
Washington, DC, September 9, 1999

INDIA

Section I. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice. India is a secular state in which all faiths generally enjoy freedom of worship; government policy does not favor any religious group. However, tension between Muslims and Hindus, and to a lesser extent between Hindus and Christians, continues to pose a challenge to the concepts of secularism, tolerance, and diversity on which the State was founded. In addition, governments at state and local levels only partially respect religious freedom.

There are no registration requirements for religions. In July 1998, Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee told Parliament that he opposed a proposal by the Delhi Union Capital government to remove churches from a list of tax-exempt religious places because sacramental wine is served there. Vajpayee stated that the proposal was wrong and that the Government was committed to preserving full religious freedom. The proposal subsequently was dropped. 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. The Constitution defines Hinduism, for legal purposes, as including the Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh faiths, a definition rejected by some persons in those communities. According to 1998 government statistics, 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 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. Christian concentrations are found in the northeastern states, as well as in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Some of the northeastern states have large Christian majorities. Sikhs are a majority in the state of Punjab. The country's caste system historically has strong ties to Hinduism. It delineates clear social strata, assigning highly structured religious, cultural, and social roles to each caste and sub-caste. Members of each caste--and frequently each sub-caste--are expected to fulfill a specific set of duties (known as dharma) in order to secure elevation to a higher caste through rebirth. Dalits (for-

merly called untouchables) 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. Caste today is therefore as much a cultural and social phenomenon as a religious one.

Over the years, lower castes and Dalits have frequently converted to other faiths because they viewed conversion as a means to achieve higher social status. Dalit leaders have frequently 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 co-religionists and Hindus through the prism of caste. Converts are widely regarded as belonging to the caste of their ancestors.

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 presently a subject of active debate within the country. Some contend that they have achieved the desired effect and should be modified, while others argue strongly that they should be continued, as the system has not adequately addressed 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 includes these faiths within the definition of Hindu. In some states, there are government jobs reserved for Muslims of low caste descent.

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.

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 non-criminal 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 in the case of certain categories of adultery; for a Christian man, adultery alone is sufficient. In May 1997, the Mumbai High Court recognized abuse alone as sufficient grounds for a Christian woman to obtain a divorce.

There is no national law to bar proselytizing by Indian Christians. Foreign missionaries generally can renew their visas, but since the mid-1960's the Government has refused to admit new resident foreign missionaries. Those who arrive now do so as tourists and stay for short periods. As of January 1993, there were 1,923 registered foreign Christian missionaries. During 1998, as in the past, state officials refused to issue permits for foreign Christian missionaries to enter some northeastern states. In March 1999, several declared missionaries reported that the Government had instituted a policy of not renewing missionaries' visas. Renewal had been routine until the institution of this new policy. The policy is being applied unevenly, as at least one Christian missionary succeeded in obtaining an extension as late as fall 1998. Missionaries and religious organizations must comply with the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), which restricts funding from abroad and, therefore, the ability of certain groups 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.

In October 1998, the Union Human Resource Development Minister floated a plan to "Indianize and spiritualize" public school curriculums at all levels and to make the study of Sanskrit compulsory from grade 3 through grade 10. The plan also contemplated the teaching of Hindu texts from the Vedas and the Upanishads in secondary school. The plan was withdrawn after protests from educators, most of the country's state education ministers, and many members of the public.

In October 1998, the BJP state government of Uttar Pradesh declared that children in government schools would henceforth be required to sing two anthems, the Vande Mataram and the Saraswati Vandana. The lyrics of the songs were offensive to the Muslim community and the proposal was shelved after protests from the press and opposition parties.

In early February 1999, following a series of attacks on Christians, the office of the Director General of Police in Gujarat reportedly sent a circular instructing district officials to collect information about Christians, including the number of missionaries, their funding sources, and the "tricks" they used to convert persons. After public criticism of the census, the government of Gujarat stated that it was being carried out to assist in the protection of Christians, and later expanded it to cover Hindus as well. However, Christians obtained a court order barring the census. On March 2, 1999, the government of Gujarat withdrew the effort.

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 51-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, the National Human Rights Commission, and the National Minorities Commission. Following outbreaks of violence or riots, the Government sponsors communal harmony festivals and peace committees aimed at restoring order.

The U.N. Special Rapporteur for All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief published a report in February 1997 on his visit of December 2-14, 1996; he visited at the invitation of the Government. Having studied the situation of the majority Hindus and minority Mus-

lims, Christians, and Sikhs, the Rapporteur concluded that the country's constitutional and legislative protections of religious freedom contributed to religious tolerance in the country, as did a "conception of secularism implying not the rejection of religion but equality for all religions." However, he warned that tolerance was susceptible to attack by religious extremists.

The status of respect for religious freedom deteriorated during the period covered by this report. While religious freedom is protected by law, 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. In particular, there was a significant increase in attacks against Christians by Hindu extremist groups during the period covered by this report. In many cases, the government response was inadequate (also see Section II).

In 1998 and early 1999 there was an unusual and serious outbreak of societal violence against Christians, apparently sparked by rumors of "forced conversions" of Hindus to Christianity (see Section II). The Government reacted with statements criticizing the violence against Christians, but efforts to prevent such incidents from occurring and to prosecute those responsible at the state and local levels were inadequate. In early 1999, the Government described the violence as a series of isolated local phenomena. The Prime Minister on January 4, 1999 pledged not to tolerate any further violence against Christians. In early January 1999, the state government of Gujarat increased police protection for Christians in the Dangs district, but stated that the press had blown the recent incidents of violence against Christians out of proportion. On January 10, Prime Minister Vajpayee visited the Dangs district in Gujarat. The positive effect of this gesture was mitigated, however, by the presence in his entourage of Hindu Jagaran Manch President Janubhai Pawar, who had been arrested in connection with violence against Christians that occurred on December 25, 1998. While in Gujarat, Vajpayee called for a national debate on conversions, which some Hindu groups had requested be banned. During the same month, Home Minister L.K. Advani called for a thorough study to determine by how much the Christian population in the Dangs area had grown in the last 10 years, and what factors had led to violence and anger over alleged "forced conversions." On January 26, 1999, President Narayanan made a televised plea for religious tolerance. On January 30, 1999, the anniversary of the death of Mahatma Gandhi, Prime Minister Vajpayee criticized the recent attacks, called for religious tolerance, and announced that he would start a fast to protest the recent violence against Christians and against low caste Hindus by higher caste Hindus in Bihar. Also on January 30, Cabinet Minister Madan Lal Khurana, who had been critical of the Government's handling of the recent attacks, resigned. He claimed that he had been silenced when he tried to criticize Hindu militants who made anti-Christian statements. In early 1999 the District Superintendent of Police and the District Collector were transferred out of the Dangs district, and the governor of Gujarat was shifted to another state.

However, in some instances, local police and government officials abetted the violence, and at times security forces were responsible for abuses. Police on occasion accompanied Hindu fundamentalists who were responsible for violence (see Section II). On November 30, 1997, police in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, incensed over the killing of a colleague by Muslim youths, joined forces with armed Hindu rioters; 18 Muslims were killed in clashes with police. The People's Union for Civil Liberties, a prominent human rights organization, reported that police took advantage of the civil unrest to wreak vengeance on Muslim traders who had stopped paying them bribes. Houses and shops owned by Muslims were looted and set ablaze in view of police; police and Hindu rioters hacked to death

riot victims at the general hospital. At times local police reportedly ignored warnings of imminent violence.

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 (mostly Hindu) security forces against the Kashmiri Muslim population. Some of the reports of such abuses were credible. However, unlike the attacks by militants on the Hindu minority in the state (see Section II), it is not clear to what extent the actions of the security forces were based on religion.

On January 7, 1999, the National Commission for Minorities (NCM), a quasigovernmental body established in 1992 to protect the rights of religious minorities, sent a team to Gujarat to depose witnesses and evaluate the Government's response to the recent violence against Christians. The government of Gujarat reportedly tried to stall the efforts of the team. The NCM released a report on January 31, 1999 which was critical of the Government's response to the occurrences, stating that "The communal situation in Gujarat is serious and of alarming dimensions and there is a pressing need to take extraordinary steps to prevent it from flaring up further and spreading to other parts of the country." The NCM urged the central Government to invoke Article 355 of the Constitution, which would empower the central Government to "give direction" to a state government to ensure compliance with federal laws, on the grounds that the government of Gujarat had failed to take adequate measures to check the violence against minorities. The recommendation was not accepted. On January 13, the NCM Chairman, Professor Tahir Mahmood, stated that the NCM had recommended that Hindus be declared minorities in 6 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.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which led a coalition national government from March 1998 until it lost a no-confidence vote in April 1999 and continues to serve in a caretaker capacity pending elections in September and early October 1999, is one of a number of offshoots of the Rashtriya Swamsewak 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, but the RSS in particular opposes conversions from Hinduism and believes all Indians 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, are also RSS members, as are the chief ministers of the state governments in Maharashtra, 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 strongly opposed by some minority religious groups. The current BJP-led national government, however, has taken no steps to implement these measures, and has promised that it

would not do so during the life of the next Parliament if it returns to power in the upcoming elections. While the BJP at national level has downplayed its Hindu nationalist agenda, 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 level have become increasingly uncooperative.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

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, a deterioration of religious tolerance was evident in several states.

India's caste system generates severe tensions due to disparities in social status, economic opportunity, and, occasionally, labor rights. These tensions have frequently led to, or exacerbated, violent confrontations and human rights abuses. However, for the most part they do not have a significant religious component.

The practice of dedicating or marrying young, pre-pubescent girls to a Hindu deity or temple as "servants of god" "Devadasis," is reported by Human Rights Watch to continue in the several southern states, including Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. Devadasis, who are generally 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 of Dedication) Act and called for the rehabilitation of Devadasis, but this law reportedly suffers from a lack of enforcement 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.

On occasion, Hindu-Muslim violence led to killings and a cycle of retaliation. For example, in November 1997, police in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu joined Hindu rioters, killed 18 Muslims, and committed numerous other abuses (see Section I). On February 14, 1998, Muslim militants in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu retaliated for this incident with a series of bombings in Coimbatore that took the lives of 68 persons and left at least 200 others injured. Following the Coimbatore bombings, police recovered nearly 500 pounds of explosives in Chennai and defused additional bombs in Chennai and Coimbatore. On May 30 and 31, 1999, Tamil Nadu police found and defused four bombs in Chennai, Tiruchchirappali, and Coimbatore; a smaller bomb exploded in a Muslim majority neighborhood in Chennai. The Al-Ummah militant group, which carried out the 1998 Coimbatore serial bombings, was charged with responsibility.

Controversy between Hindus and Muslims continues with regard to three sites where mosques were built centuries ago on sites where temples are believed to have stood previously. The potential for renewed Hindu-Muslim violence remained considerable. In February 1998, the Sri Krishna Commis-

sion, set up by the Government to inquire into the cause of Hindu-Muslim riots in Mumbai in December 1992 and January 1993, released its report. The riots, which followed the destruction of an historic mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu mobs in December 1992, left more than 1,000 persons, mostly Muslims, dead. The Maharashtra government, led by a BJP-Shiv Sena coalition, rejected the report, which laid responsibility for much of the violence on leaders of both of those parties. Several Muslim organizations have requested that the Supreme Court reverse the Maharashtra government's rejection of the report. On June 5, 1998, Hindu-Muslim clashes occurred in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, following the distribution of leaflets that "hurt religious sentiment," according to the press. More than 30 persons were injured in the violence.

In western India, Hindu extremists in 1998 set fire to Muslim shops and forced Muslims to flee their homes in retaliation for the intermarriage of Muslim men and Hindu women, and the alleged forced conversion of Hindu women to Islam.

Attacks by Muslim militants seeking to end Indian rule in Jammu and Kashmir have driven most Hindus in the Kashmir Valley (Pandits) to seek refuge in camps in Jammu or with relatives in New Delhi or elsewhere. Throughout the period covered by this report, militants continued to target members of the state's remaining Hindu community with violence. Militants carried out several execution-style mass killings of Hindu villagers in Jammu and Kashmir between January and August 1998, and again in February 1999. On January 25, 1998, in Wandama, north of Srinagar, terrorists killed 23 persons from 4 Hindu families; the victims included 10 women and 4 children. The army accused the Harkat-ul-Ansar terrorist organization of the massacre. On March 22, 1998, six suspected militants killed three family members, set fire to a Hindu temple, and blew up a van in Punjab. On April 17, 1998, in Thub, Udhampur district, suspected militants massacred 26 Hindu villagers, including 2 women and 2 children. On May 4-5, 1998, militants killed 13 civilians in 2 separate incidents near Poonch in Doda district. In Poonch district, Jammu, on May 6, 1998, terrorists killed five family members in the midst of a funeral procession. On May 16, 1998, militants killed seven persons in Binola Choura village, north of Jammu. On June 19, 1998, in Champnari village, Doda district, Kashmir, militants attacked 2 marriage parties, killing 26 Hindu men; police blamed the attack on the Hizbul-Mujahideen organization. On July 28, 1998, militants killed 16 Hindu villagers in 2 separate attacks in the villages of Channa and Sarwan, outside of Kishtwar, in Doda district. On August 4, 1998, gunmen killed 19 Muslim villagers, including 14 children and 2 women, in what the press reported as a feud between rival members of the Harkat-ul-Ansar. On February 20, 1999, militants killed 20 Hindu villagers, including 6 women, 1 girl, and several members of a marriage party, in three villages in the Udhampur and Rajouri districts of Jammu. The army claimed that the Pakistan-based Lashkar-i-Toiba was responsible for the killings.

In his report on his 1996 visit, the U.N. Special Rapporteur for All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief cited the "traumatic situations" in Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, as well as intercommunal rioting in Mumbai and incidents of religious extremism. The Special Rapporteur warned that the country's tradition of religious tolerance is susceptible to attack by religious extremists.

There was a sharp increase in the number of attacks against Christian communities and Christian missionaries by Hindu extremists during the period covered by this report. According to Indian human rights organizations, there were over 90 incidents during 1998, primarily of mob violence that took

the form of the destruction of churches and religious property and violent attacks on Christian pilgrims and leaders. The National Commission for Minorities initiated investigations into many of these cases. Commenting on the phenomenon, a member of the National Commission for Minorities told the press that "in the past year, we've got many more complaints regarding attacks on the Christian community and encroachment on church properties. There is a definite trend." Such attacks occurred in Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, and Gujarat. The press reported the following incidents: In December 1997 and January 1998 in Ahwa, Dangs district, Gujarat, there was a series of attacks on Christian tribals allegedly carried out by the Vanvasi Kalyan Parishad. On January 6, 1998, in Bangaon, Bihar, Vilian Topno, a priest, was attacked and seriously injured. His assailants were never identified. In February 1998, in Hansi, Haryana, a 200-year-old Christian cemetery was occupied and a tomb was damaged. On February 15, 1998, in Latur, Maharashtra, a Catholic Hospital Association of India camp was attacked, allegedly by members of the Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh. On March 13, 1998, in Khanvel, Dadra, and Nagar Haveli, Holi revellers attacked Christian pilgrims. On April 3, 1998, in Baroda, Gujarat, a Christian convention held on the polo grounds was attacked. In April 1998, in Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh, Gipson's Central Baptist Church was threatened with demolition, allegedly by members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or World Hindu Council, a Hindu religious organization affiliated with the RSS. On April 11, 1998, in Palanpur, Gujarat, worshippers at a prayer meeting were attacked. On April 16, 1998, in Naroda, Gujarat, a 200-member mob allegedly led by activists of the Bajrang Dal, a militant Hindu youth organization that belongs to the same family of Hindu nationalist organizations as the BJP and the RSS, demolished a chapel. On May 5, 1998, in Koshippilly, Kerala, the Little Flower Church was vandalized and a crucifix desecrated.

Christian groups in India reported a number of other incidents later in 1998. For example, on September 23, 1998, four Catholic nuns in Jabhua, Madhya Pradesh, were victims of a gang rape. Church authorities state that the attackers were Hindu extremists; the Government claimed that some of the suspects are Christians. Police arrested some suspects in connection with the case and sought several others. Those arrested in connection with the case have been released on bail, but still face criminal charges. The NCM recommended a new inquiry into the case. Also on September 23, 1998, a Catholic priest was attacked by a crowd led by a local politician belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party in Jhamli, Madhya Pradesh. On September 26, 1998, members of three extremist Hindu organizations broke into the Union Church in Amaun, Uttar Pradesh, and placed a statue of the Hindu god Shiva in the church. On October 16, 1998, a gathering in a prayer hall in Kumbale village, Nasik, Maharashtra was attacked by armed assailants and the prayer hall was demolished. On October 30, 1998, delegates attending the National Christian Conference in Baroda, Gujarat, were attacked and beaten with belts, chains, and sticks. On November 4, 1998, a group of unidentified assailants attempted to set fire to a church in Borigautha village, Dangs district, Gujarat. On November 5, 1998, a church was burned down in Gadhavi village, Gujarat. On November 9, 1998, in Kheda Khummar village, Haryana, assailants broke into a Catholic convent and threatened 2 nuns. On November 12, 1998, a church was burned down in Kamath village, Gujarat. On November 14, 1998, a church was burned down in Lahanchariya village, Gujarat. On November 22, 1998, in Kulai, Karnataka, a Christian prayer service at St. Thomas Evangelical Church of India was attacked by approximately 40 armed persons; the pastor and several worshippers were beaten. Other violence included attacks on convents in Baghpat and West Bengal; the demolition of a chapel in Malad; Bible burning in Rajkot; disruption of Christian prayer meetings in Baroda and Rajkot; the burning of a church in Nasik, Maharashtra; and the exhu-

mation of a Christian grave in Kapdwanj. Priests and nuns also have been killed in Bihar. In some instances, local police and government officials abetted the violence.

At the end of 1998, a wave of apparently organized attacks against Christians began. Many of the attacks occurred in the Dangs district of Gujarat. On December 25, 1998, 12 armed members of the Hindu extremist group Bajrang Dal accosted 1,000 persons attending a dance at the St. Francis School in Borivili, Bombay; several of the assailants were detained by police and later released. Also on December 25, 1998, assailants set fire to several vehicles in the parking lot of the Seventh-Day Adventist church in Subir village, Dangs district, Gujarat, while worshipers were inside. The same day, a rally was held in Ahwa, Dangs district, by members of the Hindu Jagran Manch (HJM) and the VHP; approximately 4,000 persons marched on a local church, but were turned back by police. Three members of the Christian community in Ahwa, Dangs district, Gujarat, were attacked and seriously injured by members of the Hindu Dharmajagaran Manch organization after the rally turned into a riot. Part of the mob then marched to a local Christian school, where rioters damaged a student hostel before being dispersed by police. The mob reportedly separated into smaller groups at that point, which went to other areas where rioters attacked Christian schools and prayer halls. By dawn on December 26, several separate attacks had been carried out in the Dangs district. Among the attacks were the following: On the night of December 25, 1998, a prayer hall was demolished and burned by a mob shouting Hindu slogans in Jamalpada village, Dangs district, Gujarat. After the attack villagers claim that Christians were denied the right to use the local well, which was owned by a Hindu. Police interceded to resolve the dispute. On December 26, 1998, approximately 30 members of the Bajrang Dal attacked the Navjyot school in Subir village, Dangs district, Gujarat, setting fire to a jeep and a motorcycle on the premises and assaulting the school principal. During Christmas week 1998 in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, members of the Shiv Sena political party attempted to disrupt local Christian observance of Christmas by decorating Christian neighborhoods with Hindu symbols and directing shop owners in commercial districts to remove Christmas decorations. On December 30, four nuns and two priests reportedly were injured slightly when a mob attacked and set fire to a Catholic prayer hall in Jharsol, Gujarat. On December 31, a mob shouting slogans of the VHP entered the village of Naktiyanvath, Dangs district, Gujarat, and destroyed the local church. On January 11, 1999, two Christian prayer halls were set on fire and damaged in the Dangs district of Gujarat. On January 27, 1999, 12 Christian villagers were "reconverted" forcibly to Hinduism under threat of the loss of the right to use the local well and the destruction of their homes. The "reconversion" was carried out by youths working with Swami Ashim Anand, a Hindu active in "reconverting" tribals in the area. However, the villagers stated that prior to becoming Christians, they had not been Hindu. Soon after the late December 1998 incidents in Ahwa, the Home Minister of Gujarat went to Ahwa and set up inter-community goodwill committees. On December 29, the government of Gujarat announced it had arrested 43 persons and charged 13 of them in connection with the violence in Ahwa.

On January 23, 1999, Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons were killed. The three were asleep in their car in Manoharpur, Keonjhar district, Orissa, when a mob shouting Hindu slogans set fire to their car. Villagers who tried to help Staines and his sons reportedly were beaten. Staines and his sons were in the village to attend an annual Bible camp. Staines had worked in India for many years, and ran a hospital and clinics for lepers in Orissa. Police arrested 51 suspects in connection with the crime, and sought others, including Dara Singh, who allegedly organized the attack and is a supporter of the Bajrang Dal. Most of those arrested, however, were released for lack of evidence. Some of the suspects reportedly were members or supporters of the Bajrang Dal. On January

30, 1999, Home Minister L.K. Advani stated that the Bajrang Dal had not been involved in the Staines killings. However, soon after the incident, the Government ordered a judicial inquiry into the killings. A Supreme Court Justice, D.P. Wadhwa, was appointed to head the Commission of Inquiry. The Commission was criticized for not moving as aggressively as many had hoped; the head of the Commission criticized the central Government for failing to provide adequate resources to carry out the investigation. Hearings were held from March 30, 1999, to April 17, 1999, in Bhubhaneshwar, Orissa. The report of the Commission of Inquiry was submitted to the Government in late June 1999, but had not been made public as of June 30, 1999.

On March 16, 1999, clashes between Hindu and Christian tribals in the village of Ranalai in southern Orissa broke out, which resulted in injuries to more than 12 persons and the burning of 157 Christian homes. The dispute began in February 1999, when a Christian cross that had been etched into a hillside 20 years earlier was converted into a Hindu trishul (trident symbol). Local Christians painted over the trident and repainted the cross. Despite local efforts to mediate the dispute, violence broke out on March 16. By March 17, 26 persons from both communities had been arrested for their alleged involvement in the incident. Bharat Paik, head of the local BJP, reportedly claimed that the Christians burned their own homes.

Since 1998, there have been reports of increasing harassment of Christian aid workers. Many report having been hampered in their work due to threats, bureaucratic obstacles, and, in some cases, physical attacks on their workers. Several Christian relief organizations have reported difficulty in getting visas renewed for foreign relief workers (see Section I). In 1998, a group of local Hindu fundamentalists allegedly smashed the furniture in a chapel in a Christian hospital near Varanasi; they were accompanied by police and a local official. The hospital reportedly was told that it could not reopen the chapel. In mid-February 1999, a group of Hindu activists attacked a mobile medical clinic carrying nuns from the Sisters of Charity, Mother Theresa's order, who were distributing free medicine to the poor outside of Mumbai. The men knocked medicines off of the display racks, ransacked the van, attacked the driver, and forced the nuns and the driver to leave the area. Two men were arrested in connection with the attack in late February and early March 1999.

Members of militant Hindu organizations (including members of the Hindu Jagran Manch, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, and the Bajrang Dal) reportedly 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. On September 30, 1998, the Secretary General of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad publicly warned Christian missionaries to leave India. VHP working president Ashok Singhal in December 1998 publicly stated that the missionaries were part of a "Christian conspiracy to propagate their religion and wipe out Hinduism from this country." On December 29, 1998, the VHP announced that it would launch a nationwide campaign against Christian missionaries to stop them from converting Hindus to Christianity. Missionaries have been operating schools and medical clinics for many years in tribal areas, including in the Dangs district in Gujarat. Tribals, such as those attacked in the Dangs district, 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.

On September 9, 1998, a group of Christian church leaders from around the country met to discuss violent incidents against Christians; the group issued a statement to the Government setting out their concerns. On December 4, 1998, Christians staged a nationwide protest against the recent wave of attacks. In New Delhi, 6,000 protestors marched on Parliament and demanded that the Government intervene with Hindu groups that were allegedly behind the attacks. In Gujarat the state government threatened to cease giving aid to educational institutions that closed to observe the protest; there were no reports that the state government carried out this threat.

On January 5, 1999, a new Hindu militant group, the Hindu Dharma Raksha Samiti, held its second convention in Peth, Maharashtra. Among other demands issued by its leaders was an ultimatum to missionaries to close their offices in tribal districts in certain parts of Gujarat and Maharashtra by March 31, 1999, or be held responsible for any ensuing conflicts. On February 21, 1999, the Bajrang Dal held a convocation in Mumbai, which approximately 20,000 persons attended. At the convocation, anti-minority rhetoric reportedly was common, and numerous resolutions were passed that, if ever acted upon, would restrict freedom of religion and increase communal tensions. Among the resolutions passed were ones that called for a ban on conversion from Hinduism and a ban on using loudspeakers at mosques for the call to prayer.

Despite the incidents of violence 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 (Hindi-Urdu poetry sessions) held on many occasions are examples of 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 the recent episodes of violence against Christians, Muslim groups protested the treatment of Christians by Hindu extremists. In late December 1998, 200 Muslims of the Mumbai Minorities Front held a march in Mumbai to protest the attacks on Christians in Gujarat. They marched to the office of a state official, where they demanded, among other things, that the government of Gujarat be dismissed for its tardy response to the anti-Christian violence. On January 29, 1999, leading Muslim religious leaders and politicians joined Christian leaders at a protest held in New Delhi against the Government's response to violence against Christians.

Section III. U.S. Government Policy

During 1998 and the first half of 1999, the U.S. Mission has continued to promote religious freedom through contact with the country's senior leadership, as well as with state and local officials. The Embassy and consulates regularly report on events and trends that affect religious freedom.

The Ambassador on several occasions expressed to senior government leaders the deep concern in the United States over the attacks on Christians in 1998 and early 1999 that were carried out by groups loosely affiliated with the BJP government. The Ambassador met with Home Minister L.K. Advani on October 22, 1998, and with BJP President Kushabau Thakre on November 6, 1998; on both occa-

sions the Ambassador noted the increasing number of attacks on Christians being carried out by organizations affiliated with the RSS, and thus the BJP. On January 12, 1999, the Ambassador met with VHP President V.H. Dalmia to raise the issue of violence against Christians. On January 6, 1999, Assistant Secretary of State for South Asian Affairs Karl Inderfurth met with Indian Ambassador Naresh Chandra in Washington, and during the meeting he relayed U.S. concern about the persecution of Christians in India. He also stated that the United States opposed any instance of religious intolerance, no matter what religion was concerned. On February 1, 1999 Assistant Secretary of State Inderfurth met with Foreign Secretary K. Raghunath and again raised the issue of the attacks on Christians, and the U.S. concern over the matter. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Harold Hongju Koh met with Home Secretary B.P. Singh to discuss religious persecution issues on February 2, 1999. The Secretary's Special Representative for International Religious Freedom, Robert Seiple, met with Indian Ambassador Chandra in Washington on February 22, 1999, and discussed the violence against Christians in India. In March 1999, the U.S. Consul in Mumbai expressed concern over the census of Christians to be carried out by the state police of Gujarat.

Embassy officials meet with religious officials to monitor religious freedom on a regular basis. For example, the U.S. Consul General in Mumbai and other consulate officers met with the Cardinal and Archbishop of Mumbai and other bishops to discuss the recent attacks on Christians in October 1998 and February 1999; an embassy official in New Delhi met with Alan de Lastic, the Archbishop of Delhi and president of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of India, in October 1998; the Consul General in Calcutta met with the city's Archbishop in November 1998; and the Ambassador and other embassy officials met with representatives of the Christian community in December 1998. The Embassy 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 embassy staff members meet with local NGO's to keep apprised of developments concerning religious freedom.

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