

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	347
Land:	Indien
Kilde:	US Department of State
Titel:	2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: India
Udgivet:	21. juni 2019
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	3. juli 2019

Document #2011171

USDOS – US Department of State

2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: India

Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion; mandates a secular state; requires the state to treat all religions impartially; and prohibits discrimination based on religion. It also states citizens must practice their faith in a way that does not adversely affect public order, morality, or health. Nine of the 29 states have laws restricting religious conversions. Some human rights groups stated that these laws fostered hostility against minority communities. There were reports by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that the government sometimes failed to act on mob attacks on religious minorities, marginalized communities, and critics of the government. Some senior officials of the Hindu-majority Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) made inflammatory speeches against minority communities. Mob attacks by violent extremist Hindu groups against minority communities, especially Muslims, continued throughout the year amid rumors that victims had traded or killed cows for beef. According to some NGOs, authorities often protected perpetrators from prosecution. As of November, there were 18 such attacks, and eight people killed during the year. On June 22, two Uttar Pradesh police officers were charged with culpable homicide after a Muslim cattle trader died of injuries sustained while being questioned in police custody. In a separate incident, a court in Jharkhand sentenced 11 individuals, including a local BJP official, to life in prison for beating to death a Muslim, whom his killers believed to be trading in beef. On July 17, the Supreme Court said violence in the name of “cow vigilantism” was unacceptable and the onus of preventing such incidents lay with the states. Attacks on religious minorities included allegations of involvement by law enforcement personnel. On January 10, Jammu and Kashmir police arrested eight men, including four police personnel, in connection with the kidnapping, gang rape, and killing of an 8-year-old girl. The men allegedly kidnapped the victim, took her to a nearby temple, and raped and killed her in an effort to drive her nomadic Muslim community out of the area. In September Uttar Pradesh authorities suspended three police officers after videos surfaced of them abusing a Hindu woman in Meerut for reportedly consorting with a Muslim man. The central and state governments and members of political parties took steps that affected Muslim practices and institutions. The government continued its challenge in the Supreme Court to the minority status of Muslim educational institutions, which affords them independence in hiring and curriculum decisions. Proposals to rename Indian cities with Muslim provenance continued, most

notably the renaming of Allahabad to Prayagraj. Activists said these proposals were designed to erase Muslim contributions to Indian history and had led to increased communal tensions.

There were reports of religiously motivated killings, assaults, riots, discrimination, vandalism, and actions restricting the right of individuals to practice their religious beliefs and proselytize. According to Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) data presented in the lower house of parliament on February 6, communal incidents increased by 9 percent from 2015 to 2017, with 822 incidents resulting in 111 deaths and 2,384 injuries in 2017. Authorities often failed to prosecute perpetrators of “cow vigilante” attacks, which included killings, mob violence, and intimidation. On July 21, a group attacked and killed Rakbar Khan, a Muslim dairy farmer from Haryana, while he was transporting two cows at night. In December an estimated 300 persons, angered by reports of cows being slaughtered in the area, set fire to the police station in Chigrawati and killed a police officer. An 18-year-old protester was also killed in the violence. A mob assaulted two Muslim men, killing one, in Madhya Pradesh’s Satna District on May 17, alleging they were slaughtering a bull. Police arrested four assailants and filed a complaint alleging cow slaughter against the injured survivor. On January 20, a Christian pastor was found dead at his residence in Tamil Nadu. Members of his congregation alleged he had been murdered, and that he had been a victim of frequent past harassment by Hindu fundamentalist organizations. According to the NGO Persecution Relief’s 2017 Annual Report released in January, there were 736 incidents of persecution against Christians in 2017 compared to 348 in 2016. Tradition and social custom continued to deny entry to women and members of Dalit communities (former untouchables) into many places of worship. In December the Shiv Sena Party published an editorial calling for government to curb the growth of the country’s Muslim population through such measures as compulsory family planning for Muslims. On September 28, the Supreme Court overturned a ban on females aged 10 to 50 years from entering the Hindu Sabarimala temple in Kerala, a move that, according to media, sparked political controversy across the country.

Senior U.S. government officials underscored the importance of respecting religious freedom and promoting tolerance throughout the year with the ruling and opposition parties, civil society and religious freedom activists, and religious leaders belonging to various faith communities. In March a U.S. expert discussed racial and ethnic tolerance with audiences in Chennai and Mumbai. In June the Ambassador and the visiting U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations stressed the importance of religious freedom during interactions with multiple religious leaders in Delhi. In almost every visit the Ambassador made in India, he engaged with religious communities, including representatives of the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh faiths. In August the Department of State Senior Bureau Official for South and Central Asian Affairs visited India and convened a roundtable with senior leaders representing a number of faith groups to exchange views on religious freedom and tolerance. In December the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities met with government officials, religious minority groups, and civil society representatives in Delhi and Lucknow to discuss the challenges faced by religious minorities in India.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.30 billion (July 2018 estimate). According to the 2011 national census, the most recent year for which disaggregated figures are available, Hindus constitute 79.8 percent of the population, Muslims 14.2 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, and Sikhs 1.7 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians (Parsis), Jews, and Baha'is. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs officially classifies more than 104 million members of Scheduled Tribes – indigenous groups historically outside the caste system who often practice animism and indigenous religious beliefs – as Hindus in government statistics. Approximately one-third of Christians also are listed as part of Scheduled Tribes.

According to government estimates, there are large minority Muslim populations in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Telangana, Karnataka, and Kerala states. Muslims constitute 68.3 percent of the population in Jammu and Kashmir, the only state in which Muslims constitute a majority. Slightly more than 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni; most of the rest are Shia. Christian populations are found across the country but in greater concentrations in the northeast, as well as in southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Three small northeastern states have large Christian majorities: Nagaland (90 percent of the population), Mizoram (87 percent), and Meghalaya (70 percent). Sikhs constitute 54 percent of Punjab's population. The Dalai Lama's office estimates there are significant resettled Tibetan Buddhist communities in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttarakhand, and Delhi. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there are approximately 108,000 Tibetan Buddhists in the country and 21,000 Muslim refugees from Burma.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The constitution mandates a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to profess, practice, and propagate religion freely, subject to considerations of public order, morality, and health. It prohibits government discrimination based on religion, including with regard to employment, as well as any religion-based restrictions on individuals' access to public or private facilities or establishments open to the general public. The constitution states religious groups have the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes, manage their own affairs in religious matters, and own, acquire, and administer property. It prohibits compelling anyone to pay taxes to promote or maintain any specific religion. National and state laws make freedom of religion “subject to public order, morality, and health.” The constitution stipulates the state shall endeavor to create a uniform civil code applicable to members of all religions across the country.

Federal law empowers the government to ban religious organizations that provoke intercommunal tensions, are involved in terrorism or sedition, or violate laws governing foreign contributions.

Nine of the 29 states have laws restricting religious conversion: Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Uttarakhand. The legislation in Rajasthan, passed in 2008, was reviewed by the central government to ensure its provisions were in alignment with existing national laws and the constitution, and has not yet received the approval from the country's president that is required for the law to go into effect. In March Uttarakhand became the latest state to pass an anti-conversion law, making it a non-bailable offense. The law came into effect in April and was strengthened in August with the addition of provisions that allow the state to cancel the registration of institutions involved in forced conversions. Only five states have implemented rules that are required for these laws to be enforced.

Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttarakhand prohibit religious conversion by the use of “force,” “allurement,” or “fraudulent means,” and require district authorities be informed of any intended conversions one month in advance. Himachal Pradesh and Odisha maintain similar prohibitions against conversion through “force,” “inducement,” or “fraud,” and bar individuals from abetting such conversions. Odisha requires individuals wishing to convert to another religion and clergy intending to officiate in a conversion ceremony to submit formal notification to the government. Violators, including missionaries and other religious figures who encourage conversion, are subject to fines and other penalties, such as prison sentences of up to three years in Chhattisgarh and up to four years in Madhya Pradesh if the converts are minors, women, or members of government-designated, historically disadvantaged groups (known as Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes). Gujarat mandates prior permission from the district magistrate for any form of conversion and punishes forced conversions with up to three years' imprisonment and a fine up to 50,000 rupees (\$720). In Himachal Pradesh, penalties include up to two years' imprisonment and/or fines of 25,000 rupees (\$360). Punishments for conversions involving minors, Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe members, or in the case of Odisha, women, may consist of jail sentences rather than fines.

According to the Supreme Court, converting from Hinduism to another religion ordinarily “operates as an expulsion from the caste” since caste is a structure affiliated with Hindu society. Societal definitions of caste affiliation are determinative of a person's eligibility for government benefits.

Under Andhra Pradesh and Telangana law, authorities may prohibit proselytizing near another religion's place of worship. Punishment for violations may include imprisonment for up to three years and fines up to 5,000 rupees (\$72).

The federal penal code criminalizes “promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion” and “acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony,” including acts causing injury or harm to religious groups and members. The penal code also prohibits “deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.” Violations of any of these provisions are punishable by imprisonment for up to three years, a fine, or both. If the offense is committed at a place of worship, imprisonment may be for up to five years.

There are no requirements for registration of religious groups, although federal law requires religiously affiliated organizations to maintain audit reports on their accounts and a schedule of their activities, and to provide these to state government officials upon request.

A federal law regulates foreign contributions to NGOs, including faith-based organizations. Organizations with “definite cultural, economic, educational, religious, or social programs” must receive a federal government certificate of registration to receive foreign funds. The federal government may also require that certified organizations obtain prior permission before accepting or transferring foreign funds. The federal government may reject an application for a certificate of registration or a request for prior permission to transfer funds if it judges the recipient to be prejudicially affecting “harmony between religious, racial, social, linguistic, regional groups, castes, or communities.”

The constitution states any reference to Hindus in law is to be construed as containing a reference to followers of Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism, meaning they are subject to laws regarding Hindus, such as the Hindu Marriage Act. Subsequent legislation continues to use the word Hindu as a blanket category that includes Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha’i, and Jains, but clarifies these are separate religions whose followers are included under the legislation.

Federal law provides minority community status to six religious groups: Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, and Buddhists. State governments may grant minority status to religious groups that are minorities in a particular region and designate them as minorities under state law. Minority status makes these groups eligible for several government assistance programs. The constitution states the government will protect the existence of religious minorities and encourage conditions for the promotion of their individual identities.

Personal status laws determine rights for members of certain religious communities in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance based on religion, faith, and culture. Hindu, Christian, Parsi, Jewish, and Islamic personal status laws are legally recognized and judicially enforceable. Personal status issues not defined for a community in a separate law are covered under Hindu personal status laws. These laws, however, do not supersede national- and state-level legislation or constitutional provisions. The government grants autonomy to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board and the Parsi community to define customary practices. If the law board or community leaders cannot offer satisfactory solutions, the case is referred to the civil courts.

Federal law permits interfaith couples to marry without religious conversion. Interfaith couples, and all couples marrying in a civil ceremony, are required to provide public notice 30 days in advance – including addresses, photographs, and religious affiliation – for public comment. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, or Jains who marry outside their religions, however, face the possibility of losing their property inheritance rights under those communities’ personal status laws.

The law recognizes the registration of Sikh marriages. There are no divorce provisions for Sikhs under personal status laws. Other Sikh personal status matters fall under Hindu codes. Under the law, any person, irrespective of religion, may seek a divorce in civil court.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in government schools; the law permits private religious schools.

Twenty-four of the 29 states apply partial to full restrictions on bovine slaughter. Penalties vary among states, and may vary based on whether the animal is a cow, calf, bull, or ox. The ban mostly affects Muslims and members of other Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. In the majority of the 24 states where bovine slaughter is banned, punishments include imprisonment for six months to two years and a fine of 1,000 to 10,000 rupees (\$14 to \$140). Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir penalize cow slaughter with imprisonment of two to 10 years. The law in Gujarat mandates a minimum 10-year sentence (the punishment for some counts of manslaughter) and a maximum sentence of life imprisonment (the punishment for premeditated murder of humans) for killing cows, selling beef, and illegally transporting cows or beef.

The National Commission for Minorities, which includes representatives from the six designated religious minorities and the National Human Rights Commission, investigates allegations of religious discrimination. The Ministry of Minority Affairs may also conduct investigations. These bodies have no enforcement powers, but launch investigations based on written complaints by plaintiffs charging criminal or civil violations and submit their findings to law enforcement agencies for action. Eighteen of the country's 29 states and the National Capital Territory of Delhi have state minorities commissions, which also investigate allegations of religious discrimination.

The constitution allows for a form of affirmative action for Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe communities, and the “Other Backward Class,” a category for groups deemed to be socially and educationally disadvantaged. Since the constitution specifies only Hindus, Sikhs, or Buddhists shall be deemed a member of a Scheduled Caste, the only means through which Christian and Muslim individuals may qualify for affirmative action benefits is if they are considered members of the “backward” classes due to their social and economic status.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain a missionary visa.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES

On June 22, the government charged two police officers with culpable homicide after a Muslim cattle trader, Mohammad Salim Qureshi, died of injuries sustained while being questioned by police in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh. The accused officers were suspended following a police inquiry.

On May 11, a Muslim youth died in a police shooting and a Hindu shopkeeper died in his burning shop following communal clashes in Maharashtra's Aurangabad city. These events followed allegations that authorities were conducting a civic crackdown on illegal water connections in a discriminatory manner, possibly triggered by the removal of water connection of four Muslim residents. In the immediate aftermath of the violence, in which seven officers were injured, Aurangabad police arrested 14 persons. With families of both victims alleging partisan policing and video footage of the clashes receiving wide coverage on social media, police ordered an investigation.

A court in Jharkhand sentenced 11 individuals, including a local BJP official, to life in prison for beating to death Alimuddin Ansari, a Muslim, in June 2017. Ansari's killers said they believed he was trading in beef.

On August 13, the Supreme Court ordered Uttar Pradesh authorities to reinvestigate and submit a report on the June 18 killing of Qasim Qureshi, a Muslim cattle trader attacked by a mob while transporting cows through Harpur. The order came after multiple online videos surfaced casting doubt on the initial police report, which described the assault as an incident of “road rage.” In one video, a bloodied Qureshi is seen refuting claims that he was transporting the cows for slaughter. Police arrested and filed murder charges against nine individuals in connection with the attack.

On April 20, the Gujarat High Court acquitted former Gujarat Minister of State for Women and Child Development Maya Kodnani and upheld the conviction of former Bajrang Dal leader Babu Bajrangi related to the 2002 Naroda Patiya communal riots in Gujarat. Kodnani had been charged with provoking a Hindu mob. Bajrangi was accused and convicted of criminal conspiracy, collecting weapons, and leading a violent mob. In March the Supreme Court stated it would not give the Gujarat government further extensions to meet its request for a status report on disciplinary action taken against police officers convicted in the gang rape of a pregnant 19-year-old woman, Bilkis Bano, during the 2002 riots. On June 25, the Gujarat High Court sentenced P. Rajput, Rajkumar Chaumal, and Umesh Bharwad to 10 years of imprisonment for their involvement in a mob that killed 96 Muslims during the 2002 riots, reversing the judgment of a lower court. The court upheld the acquittals of 29 others in the case.

On April 1, Hyderabad police arrested four Christians for “hurting religious sentiments” for handing out Christian tracts during an Easter procession. Christian news website World Watch Monitor said the charges against Rayapuri Jyothi, Meena Kumari, Mahima Kumari, and Bagadam Sudhakar were spurious, and came following a complaint from activists of the Hindu nationalist organization Hindu Jana Shakti. Authorities released the individuals on bail on April 3. According to other news reports, however, the police also filed charges against four activists of the Hindu Jana Shakti in the same case, charging them with “outraging the modesty” of the Christian women and forcing them to wear the traditional Hindu vermilion mark on their foreheads.

The NGO Alliance Defending Freedom India (ADFI) stated authorities pursued charges against members of the minority Christian community in several states under religious conversion laws.

On September 12, police in Uttar Pradesh’s Jaunpur District charged 271 Christians with “spreading lies about Hinduism” and allegedly drugging people to try to convert them to Christianity. The police action came after a local Hindu group filed a complaint with the court alleging the Christians refused to stop conducting Sunday prayer services and spread misinformation about Hinduism. Deputy Police Superintendent Anil Kumar Pandey said the individuals were “accused of various criminal offenses like fraud, defiling places of worship, and prejudice against national integration.”

On January 10, Jammu and Kashmir police arrested eight Hindu men, including four police personnel and a retired government official, in connection with the kidnapping, gang rape, and killing of 8-year-old Asifa Bano. The victim belonged to a Muslim tribal community in Kathua District and was kidnapped while grazing her horse in a meadow. The men allegedly took Bano to a nearby Hindu temple where they drugged and raped her over the course of several days. According to media reports, the men raped and murdered Bano to drive her nomadic Muslim community out of the area. The Jammu High Court Bar Association joined several Hindu groups and two BJP state government ministers in a protest to demand the release of the accused, saying it was an anti-Hindu move by police and prosecutors in the Muslim-majority state. On May 7, the Supreme Court ordered the transfer of the trial to Punjab’s Pathankot District. The two state BJP ministers who attended the rally supporting the suspects resigned their positions.

In September Uttar Pradesh authorities suspended three police officers after video surfaced of one of the officers slapping a Hindu woman for reportedly consorting with a Muslim man while two other officers taunted her. Media reported police were dispatched to rescue the interfaith couple, both medical college students, whom members of a Hindu nationalist organization had attacked in protest of so-called “love jihad,” a term used to accuse Muslim men of converting Hindu women by seducing them.

On December 9, police in Bakhitayrpur village, Patna District, Bihar State, arrested and detained a local Christian pastor for attempted forced conversions after he showed a film about Jesus. Local residents reportedly tried to stop the pastor from showing the film and said they wanted him removed from the village. According to media reports, the police detained the pastor but did not arrest him, and told him to return to his home village and not return to Bakhitayrpur.

In May the Global Council of Indian Christians (GCIC) reported police in Uttar Pradesh arrested Rev. Gyan Singh and another Pentecostal Christian in the village of Bugauliya Block, Basti District for forced conversions. Police told GCIC that they would release the two without charges. In June authorities arrested an Uttar Pradesh pastor, Dependra Prakash Maleywar, after he was accused of the forced conversion of 16 persons. Police originally arrested Maleywar after a local Hindu activist accused him of an assault against some activists of the Bajrang Dal Hindu group. A judge ordered Maleywar to 14 days of judicial custody pending investigation; after a week, authorities released him on bail. Police in Jharkhand arrested Dalu Soren, a Christian veterinarian, on October 16, after a 13-year-old girl’s father filed a complaint charging forced conversion.

According to the website AsiaNews and Catholic media outlet Crux, four men attacked a Catholic priest, Vineet Vincent Pereira, who was conducting a prayer service in Ghohana, Uttar Pradesh on November 14. The four attackers were allegedly members of a Hindu group trying to “reconvert” Hindus who had earlier changed their religious beliefs. After the attack, police took Pereira into protective custody, but charged him the next day with rioting and unlawful assembly. The attackers were not charged.

In October Hyderabad police arrested well-known Muslim preacher Brother Imran after he allegedly made derogatory remarks against the Shia community and another Islamic group. According to the complainants, Imran tried to create “communal animosity” and outraged the feelings of the Shia community, resulting in tension in the area. He was released on bail and the court had not taken up his case by year’s end.

On August 27, a special court in Ahmedabad, Gujarat sentenced Farooq Bhana and Imran Sheru to life imprisonment and acquitted three others accused of setting fire to the Sabarmati Express train on February 28, 2002, that killed 59 Hindu pilgrims and led to large-scale intercommunal riots in the state of Gujarat in 2002. By year’s end, courts convicted 33 suspects in the case and eight remained at large.

In its World Report covering 2018, Human Rights Watch (HRW) said the government failed to “prevent or credibly investigate” mob attacks on religious minorities, marginalized communities, and critics of the government. At the same time, according to HRW, some BJP officials publicly supported perpetrators of such crimes and made inflammatory speeches against minority communities, which encouraged further violence. According to HRW, mob violence against minority communities amid rumors that they traded or killed cows for beef, especially Muslims, by extremist Hindu groups continued throughout the year. As of November, there had been 18 such attacks, and eight people killed during the year.

On December 15, police in Assam arrested two men who vandalized a Catholic church and a grotto in the village of Chapatoli. Police stated they believed the two to be responsible for the desecration of the church’s crucifix and for toppling a statue.

In June media reported Arunachal Pradesh’s BJP Chief Minister Pema Khandu announced that his government would repeal the state’s 40-year-old anti-conversion law.

On September 18, media reported a village council in Haryana passed a decree urging Muslim residents to adopt Hindu names, refrain from such actions as growing beards or wearing traditional skullcaps, and avoid praying in public. The announcement reportedly came a month after police arrested Yamin Khokkar, a Muslim villager, whom local authorities accused of illegally slaughtering a calf. Subsequent media reports stated the village council denied it passed the decree.

According to NGO sources, authorities reportedly denied three U.S. citizens entry under non-missionary visas due to concerns they intended to engage in missionary activity, although the U.S. citizens denied that this was their intention.

On April 21, Bharat Singh, a BJP Member of Parliament from Uttar Pradesh, said, “Christian missionaries are a threat to the unity and integrity” of the country and the opposition Congress Party is “controlled by them [Christian missionaries].” The president of the GCIC, citing a survey by news channel NDTV, stated that hate speech by BJP representatives had increased by 490 percent since 2014.

In August Catholic bishops in Jharkhand sent a memorandum to the state governor in response to perceived harassment and intense scrutiny of Christian organizations by government agencies after allegations emerged regarding a baby-selling scandal in a home for unwed mothers run by the Missionaries of Charity (MOC) in Ranchi. Church leaders said the crackdown on the MOC by the Jharkhand government was a ploy to discredit the organization as part of the state government’s anti-Christian agenda.

On June 21, authorities transferred a regional passport official in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, after he reportedly refused to issue passports to an interfaith couple. Media reported the official harangued Tanvi Seth for not adopting her husband’s surname, then later suggested her spouse, Mohammad Anas Siddiqui, convert to Hinduism. The Ministry of External Affairs intervened after Seth went public with their story on social media. Authorities issued the couple passports a day later.

On June 11, Hyderabad police charged a member of the Telangana legislative assembly, T. Raja Singh of the BJP, for making hateful and derogatory remarks against Muslims and the Quran. The police arrested him on charges of promoting enmity between different groups. This was the 19th case filed against Singh. In a live Facebook video session, Singh allegedly demanded a ban on the Quran, stating that its verses called for killing Hindus.

On February 7, BJP Member of Parliament Vinay Katiyar said Muslims had “no business” staying in India. Speaking to a media organization, Katiyar said Muslims should instead settle in Bangladesh and Pakistan since they were responsible for the partition of India.

On July 31, the government of Assam published the final draft of the National Register of Citizens (NRC), a document intended to define individuals with a claim to citizenship in a state that experienced an influx of foreigners in 1971. Authorities excluded more than 4 million individuals from the list, many of them Bengali-speaking Muslims. The Supreme Court continued to oversee an appeals process at year’s end for those excluded. The Citizenship (Amendment) Bill of 2016 that would allow certain Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian (but not Muslim) migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan to become citizens continued to face strong criticism and was not taken up by the upper chamber of parliament during the year.

In January the Supreme Court ordered a newly-constituted Special Investigation Team (SIT) of law enforcement officials to assess 186 cases related to anti-Sikh riots in Delhi and Punjab in 1984. In July media reports suggested the SIT failed to begin its work due to a member refusing to participate in its proceedings.

In April the central government removed its proposed ban on selling cattle for slaughter in animal markets that had been suspended by the Supreme Court. Observers expressed concern the ban would most negatively impact Muslims, who dominate the country's quarter trillion rupee (\$3.58 billion) buffalo meat export industry. Observers noted an increase in cow vigilantism hurt members of the Muslim, Dalit, and Adivasi communities who were economically dependent on the cattle trade and leather industries. On July 17, the Supreme Court said violence in the name of cow vigilantism was unacceptable and the onus of preventing such incidents lay with the states. The court ordered all state governments to designate a senior police officer in every district to prevent mob violence, ensure that the police act promptly against attackers, and asked the legislature to consider enacting a new penal provision to deal with mob violence by self-styled cow protectors and provide deterrent-level punishment to offenders.

On July 8, Union Minister Jayant Sinha came under public scrutiny after embracing individuals convicted of killing a Muslim trader in Jharkhand in 2017. The eight men who met with Sinha were convicted of murder in the killing of Alimuddin Ansari, who they said was transporting beef. Social commentators criticized Sinha, particularly for not speaking about the victim or about justice for his surviving family members. Following the public backlash, he issued statements condemning violence and vigilantism.

On October 12, the Supreme Court stayed an order of the Uttarakhand High Court directing a blanket ban on fatwas by Islamic religious bodies. The court acted in response to a rape victim's complaint about a village council banishing her family from the village.

On September 19, the government issued an executive order to fine and imprison men who practice “triple *talaq*” – via which a Muslim man can divorce his wife instantly by saying the word “*talaq*” (Arabic for divorce) three times. Muslim women's groups have been central to efforts to end the practice, which is outlawed in many Muslim majority countries. In 2017 the Supreme Court ruled that the practice was unconstitutional and inconsistent with Islamic law and urged parliament to draft a new provision. The current executive order is scheduled to lapse if its provisions are not enacted into law by parliament before national parliamentary elections are held in 2019.

On August 28, the Punjab government passed an amendment to the federal penal code punishing the intentional desecration of certain religious texts – the Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh holy book), the Bible, the Quran, and the Bhagwad Gita – with life imprisonment. Media reports criticized the amendment as “excessive” and noted its potential misuse by authorities to restrict freedom of expression and silence political opponents. As of September 25, the proposed amendment was under review by the central government, which must approve state-specific amendments to federal law.

On July 6, Gujarat became the third state, along with Maharashtra and West Bengal, to grant the Jewish community minority status, providing members with “benefits of welfare schemes formulated for religious minority communities within the jurisdiction” of the state.

The government continued its challenge, dating from 2016, of the Supreme Court ruling regarding the minority status of Muslim educational institutions that affords these institutions independence in hiring and curriculum decisions. The central government continued to state that Aligarh Muslim University was a central university set up under an act of parliament, and therefore should not be considered a minority institution.

State and local jurisdictions submitted 25 proposals to the MHA during the year to rename cities across India, mirroring a similar trend of renaming train stations, islands, and roads that previously had British or Islamic names. According to AsiaNews and *Reuters*, BJP leaders in Uttar Pradesh decided to rename some cities that “sounded too Islamic.” In October Uttar Pradesh changed the name of Allahabad to Prayagraj. In November authorities changed the name of the Faizabad District to Ayodhya, the place where Hindus believe Lord Ram was born. Activists said these proposals were designed to erase Muslim contributions to Indian history and had led to increased communal tensions.

The Supreme Court in March overturned a 2017 Kerala High Court order that annulled the marriage of a Hindu woman and a Muslim man based on third-party allegations that she was forcibly converted to Islam, despite her denials.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In September Rajasthan police charged three men with murder in connection with the killing of Rakbar Khan, a Muslim dairy farmer from Haryana. On July 21, a group of cow vigilantes attacked Khan while he was transporting two cows at night. Authorities suspended a senior police officer after he reportedly took four hours to transport a still conscious Khan to a local hospital four kilometers (2.5 miles) away. Doctors declared Khan dead on arrival. The attack occurred in the same district, Alwar, where in April 2017 a mob killed Muslim dairy farmer Pehlu Khan on suspicion of cow smuggling.

In December a crowd estimated at more than 300, reportedly angered by reports of cows being slaughtered in the area, killed a police officer at the police station in Chigrawati when he tried to calm them. An 18-year-old protester was also killed. The mob set fire to the police station and several cars. Police arrested four men in the killing and reportedly were searching for 23 others at year’s end.

A mob assaulted two Muslim men, killing one, in Madhya Pradesh’s Satna District May 17, alleging the duo were slaughtering a bull. Police arrested four assailants and filed a complaint alleging cow slaughter against the injured survivor, who denied the charge.

On January 20, Christian pastor Gideon Periyaswamy of Maknayeem Church in Kancheepuram, Tamil Nadu, was found dead at his residence. Members of his congregation alleged he had been murdered and that he had previously been a victim of frequent harassment by Hindu fundamentalist organizations.

On November 1, Hindu priest D. Satyanarayana died in a hospital in Hyderabad due to injuries sustained in the city of Warangal on October 26. Muslim Imam Syed Sadiq Hussain allegedly assaulted the priest during an argument over the use of a loudspeaker in the temple where the deceased worked. The police charged the imam with murder and trespassing and placed him in custody pending trial.

In February media reported Ankit Saxena, a 23-year-old Hindu man, was killed on a busy road in Delhi, allegedly by family members of a Muslim woman he was courting. Authorities arrested the woman’s parents, uncle, and minor brother, who reportedly objected to the interfaith relationship, and filed charges against the family in May.

Media data project IndiaSpend stated there were eight deaths related to cow vigilantes as of year’s end, and 31 total incidents of cow vigilantism. According to the data, 73 percent of victims were Muslim. In 2017, there were 108 victims and 13 deaths in 43 incidents, and in 2016, 67 victims and 9 deaths in 30 incidents. While Muslims constituted 60 percent of the victims in 2017, they were 42 percent in 2016, with 34 percent being Dalits.

In September authorities arrested Catholic bishop Franco Mulakkal for the rape of a nun of the Missionaries of Jesus order in Kerala between 2014 and 2016. The government released the bishop on bail in October; the trial was set for 2019. The Vatican temporarily relieved him of his duties. Media reported a majority of Christians appeared to support the bishop and questioned the nun’s accusations, while others expressed support. During the summer prior to the bishop’s arrest, nuns of the Missionaries of Jesus protested and led rallies, calling for the authorities to take action.

In March media reported that members of Hindu nationalist organization Bajrang Dal chopped off the finger of a Muslim woman, Roshan Bi, and attacked her son Farzan Saiyed in Chhatral town in Gujarat when they did not follow warnings to restrict their cattle grazing only to Muslim neighborhoods. Saiyed later died from his injuries. Police arrested five assailants following community protests.

On March 12, according to several sources, Hindu supporters of a BJP member of parliament attacked a Catholic hospital and roughly handled nurses and nuns in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. The supporters were reportedly motivated by an ownership dispute over the land on which the hospital is located. Several nurses were injured in the attack. The parliamentarian, Chitamani Malviya, made claims against the hospital in 2015 and then again in January. The hospital and church disputed his claims. Using two bulldozers and armed with weapons, a crowd of nearly 100 people broke down a section of hospital wall, damaged the electrical supply and generator unit, and disconnected the water connection to the hospital, which has approximately 200 beds. According to the reports, church authorities contacted top government officials during the attack, but police did not respond. Police filed a report on the incident two days later.

According to AsiaNews, in February a group of Hindus attacked and beat a Pentecostal Christian pastor for conducting allegedly “forced conversions” in West Champaran District, Bihar. The missionary was on a bus with 13 other Pentecostals when a Hindu on the bus, reportedly upset with discussion of Christian beliefs that he overheard, alerted fellow Hindus at the next bus station. When the bus arrived, the Hindus reportedly beat the pastor and another member of the group, both of whom were transported to the hospital. Police initially declined to register a complaint, but later agreed to take statements from the pastor and other members of his group.

On July 23, media reported members of a Hindu nationalist organization attacked Sahil Khan, a Muslim man registering his marriage to a Hindu woman, outside a court in Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh. A mob reportedly dragged Khan out of the court and beat him in the street before damaging his car. Police filed charges against two individuals in connection with the attack.

According to AsiaNews, on December 16 in Tamil Nadu, a crowd of approximately 150 individuals attacked a group of 16 Christians singing Christmas carols.

Media reported that on May 24, a Sikh police officer, Gagandeep Singh, reportedly prevented a mob in Ramnagar, Uttarakhand, from lynching a Muslim youth after local residents allegedly found him meeting with a Hindu woman in a temple. Video of the event showed officer Singh taking several blows as he shielded the Muslim youth from the crowd. The crowd accused the young Muslim of “love jihad.” Police later arrested and filed charges against five of the attackers. Following his actions, Singh received death threats and was put on leave for his own protection.

ADFI reported members of Hindu nationalist groups attacked Christian leaders and their ministries, mainly in rural communities, under the pretext the Christians were practicing forced conversions, and 15 churches were closed due to concerns about ensuring the security of the churches. The government was working to reopen the churches at year’s end. ADFI also stated a pastor was assaulted in Fatehpur while conducting a Sunday service, and a mob protested the singing of Christmas carols by members of 35 different churches that came together in a Catholic church in Varanasi.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI-RLC) documented 325 cases of violence and attacks against Christians and churches during the year, compared with 351 in 2017 and 247 in 2016. Its 2018 report tracked incidents in which Christians were targeted for violence, intimidation, or harassment, and noted over 40 percent of the documented incidents occurred in Uttar Pradesh, with a significant rise between September and December. Churches were allegedly targeted by Hindu nationalist groups claiming “conversions through force or fraud” resulting in disrupted worship services, harassment of pastors and worshippers, and the arrest or detention of pastors and lay Christians. Twelve percent of the incidents were reported in Tamil Nadu.

The NGO Prosecution Relief reported 477 incidents of violence against Christians in its 2018 annual report, compared with 440 in 2017. The organization also stated that the state of religious affairs was worsening in the country, as perpetrators of religious

violence were often not prosecuted. The most common form of persecution was “threats, harassment, and intimidation.” According to the NGO, such incidents increased by 118 percent over 2017.

Media reported on January 24, unidentified persons in Nagarkurnool District in Telangana burned several copies of a Telugu translation of the Bible after forcing a group of Christian activists from Gideons International to give them the copies they were planning to distribute.

On February 6, the MHA presented data in the lower house of parliament showing a 9 percent increase in incidents of religious violence from 2015 to 2017. In 2017, there were 822 incidents, resulting in 111 deaths and 2,384 injuries.

In February the first public display of “*ghar-wapsi*” (reconversion activities facilitated by Hindu organizations for those who had left Hinduism) in Kolkata took place when the organization Hindu Samhati featured 16 members of a Muslim family who were “reconverted to Hinduism” at a public rally. Hindu Samhati founder Tapan Ghosh said he had organized similar events previously for quite some time but decided to showcase the “reconverted” people in public as “the time was right.”

International Christian Concern (ICC) documented 10 attacks on Christians in the lead-up to Easter. On April 5, ICC reported Hindu nationalists attacked a prayer gathering in the Vakel village of Bastar district in Chhattisgarh, injuring six Christians. On April 6, ADFI reported 17 anti-Christian incidents by Hindu nationalist groups within or close to Hyderabad on its World Watch Monitor website.

A crowd waving orange flags of Hindu nationalists attacked a church during a Sunday service in Naubasta, Kanpur District in Uttar Pradesh, on December 2, demanding the pastor and congregation stop the service and close down the church immediately. Police at the scene asked the Christians to leave and then dispersed the demonstrators, who threatened to return the following week. Two days before the incident a police inspector informed the pastor he was being charged with “forced conversions” following a complaint filed against him. Following the incident, police declined to accept formal complaints from the pastor or his community about the disruption of the church service.

The Times of India newspaper and other media reported that on March 25, police in Nirmal District, Telangana, used measures, including caning and teargas, to control tense crowds after individuals allegedly pelted a local mosque with stones and threw a saffron flag into the mosque during a procession to celebrate the Hindu Sri Rama Navami festival. A senior police official and a constable were injured in clashes with protesters. The police imposed the section of the criminal code that restricts assembly of more than four persons for three consecutive days to bring the situation under control. A media report quoted the district police chief as stating that six activists of the Hindu Vahini and three Muslim protesters were arrested.

On June 3, Archbishop of Goa and Daman Filipe Neri Ferrao in his annual pastoral letter called upon Catholics to fight social injustice and the trend of “mono-culturalism,” which attempted to dictate how Indians “eat, dress, live, and even worship.” In response, Surendra Jain, a leader of the Hindu nationalist group Vishwa Hindu Parishad, said the country’s Christian churches “conspire with the Vatican to destabilize the current elected government” of the BJP. According to AsiaNews, “Jain further said the Vatican not only denigrates the Hindus all over the world but also India as a nation and the Indian churches are acting as puppets in their [i.e., the Vatican’s] hands.” Jain also criticized the section of the letter in which Ferrao wrote of “the trampling of human rights in India.”

In June media reported that Aman Khan, a Muslim software engineer in Pune, Maharashtra, filed a complaint with the labor commissioner alleging his supervisor forced him to resign after he saw Khan praying in the office.

According to media reports, in July Hindu groups in Jharkhand’s Latehar District forced Christian families out of their village after they refused to renounce their religion. The reports stated that the families were “living in fear” and did not return because the local authorities were unable or unwilling to help.

In August a group of Hindus from Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, attacked and damaged a Pentecostal church in Bihar, accusing the church of forced conversions. The church said this was a “false accusation.”

Media reported on August 25, South Indian singer O.S. Arun withdrew from participation in a Christian Carnatic Music Concert in Chennai after Tamil Nadu-based Hindu organization Rashtriya Sanathana Seva Sangam called the Hindu artists associating with the event “traitors” to the Hindu faith and threatened any Hindu singer singing Christian hymns.

In October the *India Today* newspaper conducted a “sting operation” on Hindu nationalist organization Sanatan Sanstha, in which two representatives of the organization allegedly made confessions about their involvement in attacks conducted outside cinemas in Maharashtra in 2008 over the “objectionable” depiction of Hinduism in certain films and dramas.

Several acts of vandalism targeting Christian sites and symbols occurred during the year. In March a sculpture of the Virgin Mary was found headless in a grotto dedicated to her in a church in Aligondo, Odisha. Vandals attacked another Catholic church in Odisha the night before Easter Sunday, setting fire to a room storing sacred objects. On April 10, a crowd estimated at approximately 500 persons threw stones at a Christian retreat center in Neyyattinkara in Kerala, shattering windows and entrance doors. On the night of March 31, unknown individuals in Punnamoodu, Alappuzha District vandalized an Orthodox church hall, breaking windows and kicking down a door.

Media reported on March 11 that a Pentecostal church in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, was vandalized and copies of the Bible were burned, allegedly by members of a Hindu group. According to the GCIC, multiple churches in the state of Tamil Nadu experienced acts of vandalism during the year.

Tradition and social custom continued to deny entry to women and Dalits into many places of worship. On September 28, the Supreme Court overturned a ban on females aged 10 to 50 years from entering the Hindu Sabarimala temple in Kerala. According to media, the ruling sparked political controversy across the country. On May 1, media reported a Dalit woman was turned away from Sri Kamatchi Sameta Boodanadheeswarar temple in Puducherry when she tried to enter the temple during a festival. A group of people surrounded the woman and insisted she leave and visit “the temple of her community.”

Members of Hindu nationalist groups and the BJP filed a complaint against the administrators of the Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple in Tamil Nadu for allowing a group of Catholic nuns, who were part of a tourist group, to visit the site in May. According to the complaint, the presence of nuns in their religious attire in a Hindu place of worship offended Hindu believers and mocked the temple’s sanctity.

In its official newspaper, the Shiv Sena, a Hindu nationalist regional party, stated the country’s Muslim community had too many children and “needs a family planning policy.” The paper’s December 4 editorial said the policy was needed to “ensure stability in the country and maintain national security.” It added, “the population of Indian Muslims is proliferating at the speed of a bullet train. Implementing family planning on them is the only solution.”

After flooding in Kerala, a Hindu religious figure, Chakrapani Maharaj, called for disaster aid to be provided only to those who avoid eating beef. Maharaj said the floods were caused by the gods’ outrage at the consumption of beef, which he described as “the sins of the beef eaters.” Other press reports stated, however, that unlike Maharaj, most of the country was very supportive of helping all those in Kerala who needed assistance.

In March a publisher included Adolf Hitler in a children’s book on world leaders. Annushu Juneja, a publishing manager for the B. Jain Publishing Group, said Hitler was featured because “his leadership skills and speeches influenced masses.” Rabbi Abraham Cooper, associate dean of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, said in a statement, “Adolf Hitler? This description would bring tears of joy to the Nazis and their racist neo-Nazi heirs.” The publisher subsequently discontinued sales of the book.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

Throughout the year representatives from the embassy and consulates general met government officials to discuss challenges faced by religious minorities, especially Christians and Muslims, incidents of cow vigilantism, the status of religious freedom in

the country, and religiously motivated violence. In almost every visit the Ambassador made in India, he engaged with religious communities, including representatives of the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh faiths.

U.S. representatives also engaged with civil society and religious leaders on anticonversion laws, the growing politicization of the bureaucracy, the frequent local veneration of individuals who commit acts of violence against religious minorities, Islamic divorce, and the challenge of protecting personal religious laws in accordance with the constitution, the minority status of universities, and beef bans.

In May the Ambassador hosted an iftar with leaders from the Muslim, Hindu, Christian, Sikh, and Jewish communities, journalists, and multiple political parties, at which he stressed the shared commitment of the two countries to religious diversity and the importance of empathy for other faiths. In June the visiting U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations joined the Ambassador on a tour of multiple religious sites in Old Delhi, highlighting the country's rich tradition of spiritual pluralism, and met with Muslim, Jain, Hindu, Christian, and Sikh leaders. In July the Ambassador traveled to Ladakh and met with Buddhist leaders, a religious minority in the region, and highlighted via social media the religious diversity of India and Ladakh's religion and culture. In August the senior official of the Department of State Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs convened a roundtable with senior leaders from Muslim and Christian communities and discussed increased violence against religious minorities. In December the Department of State Special Advisor for Religious Minorities met with government officials, religious minority groups, and civil society representatives in Delhi and Lucknow to discuss the challenges faced by religious minorities in India.

Embassy and consulate officers continued to meet with religious organizations, missionary communities, and NGOs of all religious backgrounds to discuss religious freedom, understand concerns related to an increase in attacks against religious minorities and the perceived diminishing space for religious freedom, and monitor cases involving reports of religious persecution and religiously motivated attacks. Embassy and consulate representatives met with the Imam of Jama Masjid, leaders of several mosques, Hindu priests, and Christian and Catholic leaders, as well as representatives of the India Islamic Cultural Center, the All India Imams' Organization, the Parsi community, and Sikh leaders.

The embassy and consulates general hosted celebrations marking major religious holidays, including Ramadan, Holi, Eid al-Fitr, and Easter to bring together leaders from different religious groups and emphasize the importance of religious freedom and tolerance. In February Mumbai's Mahim Dargah (a Muslim shrine) Trustee Suhail Khandwani hosted an interfaith dialogue for visiting U.S. mayors from Anaheim, California and Louisville, Kentucky. In March the Consul General in Chennai hosted a U.S. expert on interfaith relations. The expert discussed tolerance with graduate students at the Indian Institute of Democratic Leadership in Mumbai and more than 200 Muslim youth at a grade school for Muslim children displaced during 2002 communal riots in Gujarat.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on religious freedom (covering 2018)



Country:

India

Source:

USDOS – US Department of State [\(/en/source/11558.html\)](/en/source/11558.html)

Original link:

<https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/> (<http://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/>)

Document type:

Periodical Report

Language:

English

Published:

21 June 2019

Document ID:

2011171

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ecoi.net is run by the Austrian Red Cross (department ACCORD) in cooperation with Informationsverbund Asyl & Migration. ecoi.net is funded by the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund, the Austrian Ministry of the Interior and Caritas Austria. ecoi.net is supported by ECRE & UNHCR.

