



## India – Intolerance Winning over Secularism?

Religious intolerance is on the rise in India, the most populous country in the world and once a model of secular democracy. A leading Hindu praised attacks on Christian churches, saying they are not places of worship but rather “factories for conversion of Hindus into Christianity.” He went on to urge the central government to protect those who carry out attacks. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India (CBCI) strongly condemned these remarks as highly provocative and irresponsible and highlighted the escalating violence against Christians and other minorities.

Since mid-2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a Parliamentary majority, religious minorities have felt increasingly under attack. The BJP and its volunteer arm, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), promote Hindu nationalism, defining India as a “Hindu” nation in terms of language, culture and religion. Since the BJP came to power, cases of violence against religious minorities have increased exponentially. Christians and Muslims have been assaulted, raped, and killed. The May 2024 election resulted in Modi being elected for a third term so this does not bode well for religious minorities. Under the BJP, citizenship laws are being amended to favor “Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs,” leaving Muslims and Christians as second-class citizens, or worse, leaving them vulnerable to being disenfranchised or expelled if they lack documentation to prove their citizenship.

This was not how it is supposed to be. India is a land where different faiths, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, were born and have long thrived. It is believed that the Apostle Thomas introduced Christianity in the first century AD and Islam arrived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. While Hindus make up almost 80% of the population, Muslims constitute over 14% (making India the country with the third largest number of Muslims - over 200 million), Christians 2.3% (over 26 million), and Sikhs 1.7%. Given this history, the 1950 Indian Constitution declared the country to be a secular republic guaranteeing freedom of religion. But that ideal is being severely tested as fears of religious intolerance have increased.

Christians have been arrested for participating in a group prayer at a home and for conducting a Christian marriage ceremony. Some Christians have been forced to undergo “reconversion” to Hinduism as a pre-requisite for being able to return to their villages. At least 12 of Indian’s 28 states have enacted laws that criminalize conversion of Hindus to other faiths. Some also label any offer of humanitarian, health or educational assistance to those in need, including Dalits, lower caste people, as “inducement” to convert – grounds for prosecution. Fr. Stan Swamy, an 83 year old Jesuit tribal rights activist, was jailed in

October 2020 on fabricated charges of terrorism; he was denied bail and needed medications and died in custody in July 2021.

Hate speech escalated during the 2024 election campaign as some BJP politicians sought to garner votes by swearing “to annihilate the Muslims and Christians to protect Hinduism.” The gala January 2024 dedication of a Hindu temple built on the ruins of a historic mosque further served to build support for the BJP prior to the election. Mobs have killed minorities based on false accusations of cow slaughter since Hindus consider cows to be sacred. When religious minorities are killed, the police often do not take any action so that in many places, vigilantes can act with impunity.

Tensions among Indians of different faiths are not new. In 2002, violence between Hindus and Muslims led to the death of over 1,000 people and the displacement of over 100,000, mainly Muslims, in Gujarat. In 2008 in Odisha, Hindus blamed Christians for the death of a swami and went on a rampage, killing an estimated 100 persons, injuring thousands, forcing over 50,000 to flee. The fact that a Maoist group claimed responsibility for the swami’s killing made no difference. Hundreds of Christian churches and thousands of homes were torched. Years later, Christians still wait for justice and many are afraid to return to their homes.

A February 2024 statement by the CBCI specifically mentions increased attacks on Christians in different parts of India and raises concerns that the “pluralistic, secular ethos that has always characterized our country and its Constitution” is being eroded. Christian religious leaders have decried violence against their faithful, saying, “In a secular and democratic India, there is no place for a state religion. India is not a theocracy.” The CBCI called the faithful to prayer and peaceful engagement as citizens, while also demanding “protection of our Fundamental and Minority Rights guaranteed by the Constitution.”

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has designated India as a “Country of Particular Concern (CPC)” since 2020 for its systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom but the U.S. Department of State has not so designated India in its annual religious freedom report. One USCIRF commissioner said, “I strongly appeal to the Indian leadership and people of India to continuously respect religious freedom and strive to promote India as a vibrant country of and for the multifaith people.” One can only hope that Prime Minister Modi and the BJP will recognize the contributions that religious minorities can make to the future of India and provide the necessary protections to these groups so that there can be harmony and peace.