



DESTRUCTIVE LIES

Disinformation, speech that incites violence and
discrimination against religious minorities in India

Extended version



This research has been commissioned by Open Doors
and conducted by researchers at the London School of
Economics and Political Science

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Background and research design¹

As incidents of collective and individual discrimination, violence and atrocity against Muslims and Christians in India continue to rise, particularly in rural areas, and against Dalit and Adivasi² groups, the atmosphere under which India's Christian and Muslim citizens are living is one of terror and existential threat. In this context, and with a view to preventing further death and discrimination and protecting the fundamental rights of all communities of faith in India, there is a need to provide more up-to-date evidence on 1) how disinformation and inciting speech circulates in Indian society, 2) the ways in which developments such as Covid-19 and anti-conversion laws change and influence misinformation and disinformation discourses around Christians, Muslims, and other religious minorities, 3) the links between official disinformation by politicians and those in positions of political and cultural influence; and the events of violence and/or discrimination detailed and 4) the complicity or deterrent actions of mainstream media and technology platforms and apps in the circulation of violent misinformation, dehumanizing representations of minorities and incitement to violence and discrimination. When we refer to inciting speech, we refer to Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR),³ namely "any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence."

Our crosscutting interests generated a range of pressing research questions:

1. What kind of disinformation and inciting speech can be connected with rights violations against Christians, Muslims and other minority groups in India?
2. In what ways has the advent of Covid-19 changed or enhanced earlier discourses of discrimination and inciting speech that are currently in circulation in India?
3. What are the most commonly occurring rights violations against Christians, Muslims and other religious minorities with connections to disinformation and inciting speech?
4. What media, technologies, platforms and means of communication are used to promote disinformation and inciting speech?
5. How and in what ways is disinformation and inciting speech promoted by political figures and how have national media reported this political speech?
6. What statements against Christians, Muslims and other

religious minorities gained traction in the media or social media and how did they contribute to violence and discrimination?

7. From the case studies analyzed, in which cases have the victims been provided with justice under the law? (e.g. did the police conduct investigations, file FIRs, was legal action against perpetrators of the crime taken in a timely manner, or was the victim charged with a secondary offense?)
8. What are the social, psychological, political and economic effects of disinformation and inciting speech (including Covid-related disinformation) on different social classes and geographically located groups of Christians, Muslims and other targeted minorities?

Addressing all of the above points and questions, the research presented in this report was conducted during February and March 2021 by a research team trained in ethnographic data collection, trauma-informed interviewing and visual analysis in line with full Covid-19 regulations and ethical frameworks of the British Sociological Association. Data was generated and collected through observations in localities where there had been reported incidents of anti-Christian or anti-Muslim violence, in-depth interviews with ordinary Indian citizens who have been victims of discrimination and violence linked to their faith in India, interviews with local rights activists and experts on Christian and Muslim faith-based communities in India and visual evidence provided by them.

Our research team conducted this fieldwork in Ramnagara, Tumkur, Bengaluru, Barwani, Indore, Garhwa, Rampur, Kandhamal among others in the states of Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand and Odisha respectively. Two or three researchers visited each of these locations in the four states. The choice of states and locations was guided by our knowledge of incidents of violence and/or discrimination against religious minority groups, access to gatekeeper individuals and/or organizations and our knowledge of local language and/or access to local translators. In each of these locations, we first interacted with trusted local grassroots organizations to assess the nature of the incidents, whether it was safe for those directly affected to speak to our research team and whether they were willing and able to speak to us. Given that most of the subjects of our study were isolated and vulnerable to pressure from the administration, police and in many instances from their own families and communities around them, we mainly spoke to those who were directly affected or their family members, or those witnessing and advocating on their behalf in order to minimize the risk to them. Given these circumstances, we have changed the names of all individuals in the case studies and have either removed or redacted identifying information in order to protect the identity of the people who spoke to us.

¹ All photos in this report are illustrative.

² Adivasi - literally translates to first or original inhabitant, refers to a broad way of categorising indigenous people across India. In colloquial terms, the term is most used in Hindi whereas for example the indigenous people of North East India prefer to be known as tribal societies rather than Adivasis for various reasons.

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>



Our in-depth interviews were guided by a detailed topic guide designed to elicit responses on a range of topics relating to everyday faith practice, access to economic and legal resources, discrimination and violence against religious minorities including issues related to misinformation, dehumanization and inciting speech on mainstream and social media. Additional insights were gained from unstructured interviews with pastors and other members of various churches, human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, civil society members and activists affiliated to social movements. All accounts which reference numbers of Christians or Muslims in particular regions in the data have been further triangulated via analysis of statistical data from the Indian Census (2011) as well as secondary data such as media and human rights reports. Furthermore, our researchers also kept field notes based on their own observations whilst on fieldwork. Each interview was conducted after obtaining verbal or written consent from all participants. Our interview process was empathetic to the sensitive nature of the issues under discussion and was thus guided by prioritizing the physical and emotional wellbeing of our participants. Finally, throughout our fieldwork, we maintained systematic and wide-ranging safety precautions in the context of increasing Covid-19 cases. This context itself is worthy of note.

The advent of Covid-19 with the lockdown in March 2020 and the virus's devastating spread throughout the country in March and April 2021 cannot be set aside or viewed separately from our research. The families who have been targeted by Hindutva⁴ vigilantes, the Christian congregations and Muslim neighborhoods are not any safer from previous forms of harassment and violence because of the pandemic. We have gathered evidence to suggest that while numbers of Christians and Muslims have participated whole-heartedly in relief work

both in separate organizations and alongside some Hindu and Sikh peers, the volume and types of disinformation against these communities continue to rise and multiply. Images and tropes involving the denigration of Muslims and Christians, particularly a refusal to have blood transfusions given by them, a connection of them and their faith habits of prayer and worship with the spread of the virus, economic boycotts of goods and products sold by religious minorities, accusations that they deliberately infect Hindus and more appear repeatedly on mainstream and social media platforms and apps, and only a small number of these are ever retracted or taken down. Meanwhile, vigilante mob lynchings and attacks, state harassment, attempts to drive Muslims and Christians from their land and homes, and censorship have not lessened, but are rather metamorphosing in new and disturbing ways.

Against a backdrop of super-spreader events run by Hindu and Hindutva groups and organizations for the BJP's Assembly election campaigns in five states and for various Hindu religious festivals, the primary targets of Covid-related disinformation remain Human Rights Defenders, Muslims and Christians, in particular those working as journalists, medics or engaging in relief work and political dissidence. On the 25th April 2021, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh threatened to confiscate the property and attack the workplaces of those medics and ordinary citizens appealing for oxygen or medicines online, characterizing such appeals as the spread of false information about the state. Hospitals are likewise under surveillance in case they publicize their dire need. Almost uniformly, we find, those who are actually being persecuted for these "crimes" tend to be from Christian or Muslim backgrounds.

History and Context

Conflict on the basis of religious identity has marked the history of South Asia for several centuries. The colonization of India involved the gradual consolidation of Hinduism as distinct religious and political identity that reconfigured the diverse religious affiliations into a few major religions that were accounted through census and other areas of governance (Bayly, 1999). The formation of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925 marked the beginning of a mass far right Hindu Chauvinist (Hindutva) movement that has subsequently splintered into hundreds of far-right organizations, including the current ruling political party (BJP) as well as various vigilante groups such as the VHP and Bajrang Dal (Andersen and Damle, 1987). Cutting across religions, the groups who are most affected by discrimination and violence have tended to be Muslims and Christians from Scheduled Castes and Tribes, most of whom self-identify as Dalits and Adivasis. For centuries, these communities have struggled against systemic discrimination and structural as well as material violence by dominant castes. Religious identity and indigeneity can be seen as further axes around which

⁴ Hindutva is an ideology propagated by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) a far right organization founded in 1925. The ideology advocates the establishment of a Hindu nation (borrowing from elements of early twentieth century European fascism in Germany and Italy). The ideology seeks to ground the notion of a Hindu nation based on the dominance of Hindu 'upper' castes over other castes, by othering Muslims, Christians and other religious minorities.

violence is targeted at them.

Scholars working on the topic of violence and discrimination against religious minority groups have argued that incidents of discrimination, violence and atrocity against Christians in India, although always sporadically present, have systematically increased since the 1990s and at least as far as reported findings are concerned (whether it is in terms of statistics collected by the Government of India or reported by the mainstream press); while incidents of discrimination, violence and atrocity against Muslims outnumber incidents against any other religious minority group, including Christians⁵ (Bauman and Ponniah 2017; Roji, 2015).

Violence against Christians was dispersed but prevalent, including the murder of Australian missionary Graham Staines and his family in 1992. The violence against Christians peaked in the 2007-2010 period, most notably in 2008 in Kandhamal, Odisha where more than 600 villages were ransacked, 5600 houses were looted and burnt, 54,000 people left homeless, at least 39 Christians killed and 232 churches destroyed as per the National People's Tribunal Report (although many human rights groups would argue that actual numbers were much higher). Even before this incident, in 2002 under the leadership of the then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, more than 2000 Muslims were systematically killed in a pogrom and tens of thousands of Muslims were rendered homeless.⁶ Since the rule of BJP from 2014 under Narendra Modi, violence against religious minorities has risen steadily.⁷ Apart from regular spectacular incidents of mob-lynching, even daily life for many religious minority groups is now marked by fear and a sense of abandonment from their fellow beings as well as from the government, and indeed their own religious institutions.

Caste, Indigeneity and non-denominational affiliation

The oldest form of social organization in South Asia is based on the concept of caste, with diverse religious identities (Christianity, Islam, Sikhism and so on superimposed on and intermeshing with an existing caste system. Although none of these religions except Hinduism endorse caste, the reality is that the caste system is pervasive across religions in contemporary India (and Pakistan) rather than just being a problem limited to Hinduism (Teltumbde, 2010). For a variety of reasons, some publicly touted, others tacit, the British colonial government attempted to simplify this complexity through governmental procedures (such as the Census) that insisted on limiting caste to Hinduism (Ambedkar, 1989). Even after formal independence in 1947, the consequences of such over-simplification have persisted. Today, according to the 2011 Census, although Christians officially number around 2.3% of India's population

and Muslims 13.4%, the real numbers who hold Christian and Muslim faith in India may be somewhat higher. This can be surmised based on a range of evidence and for a variety of reasons. Prime among these reasons is that Dalit and Adivasi Christians and Muslims have been placed in a position whereby they are not eligible to receive any state benefits to which they might have been formerly entitled on the basis of caste and indigeneity. Another major reason is the atmosphere of intimidation that evidently follows any proclamation of affiliation to a 'minority' religion when surrounded by Hindutva religious majoritarianism.

Given this background, there is no doubt that Dalits and Adivasis suffer most violence and much discrimination based on their religious identities and faith-based practices. Since the 1950s, Dalit and Adivasi groups have converted to Catholic, Anglican and Protestant denominations as well as to Pentecostalist evangelism and other smaller affiliations in several waves (Burgess, 2001; McGee, 1996). However, following global trends, the last three to four decades have seen a phenomenal growth of non-denominational Christianity, including Pentecostal, Bathsheba (colloquially known as Mercy churches) and a



⁵ PhD thesis by Sudhir Selvaraj (forthcoming) from Kings College, London.

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/14/new-india-gujarat-massacre>

⁷ 2019 US State Department report on Religious Freedom in India, available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/india/>

wide number of other affiliations in India that can be called charismatic post or nondenominational affiliations. The groups affiliated to Catholic and Protestant denominations have managed to provide reasonable support to their own followers and, in general, violence and everyday discrimination against these Christians is relatively low. However, the followers of non-denominational groups who tend to face the most violence have received insufficient support from other Christian denominations. There is a strong need to bolster inter-denominational or post-denominational Christian and secular institutions and strategies that seek to show solidarity and to protect the most vulnerable.

Similarly, amongst Muslims, those who are most affected tend to be Pasmanda Muslims who constitute nearly 85% of Indian Muslims as opposed to Ashrafiya Muslims (who can be conceived of as the dominant castes amongst Muslims).⁸ Our evidence suggests that the Ashrafiya Muslims (who are involved, as fellow Muslims, in helping survivors of violence and discrimination) are sympathetic towards those who are receiving discrimination and violence in the broader Muslim community, and even experience secondary trauma and anguish themselves. We also found, however, that they are by and large still unable to see and accept the existence of mechanisms of caste-based divisions between Muslims. Not fully addressing these internal problems and hierarchies in both Christianity and Islam in India has translated into a lack of institutional support from many powerful religious institutions to help those who are directly affected by the climate of Hindutva discrimination, dehumanization and violence.

Structural incentives for vigilantism against minorities

Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won the elections in 2014 to become the ruling party in power at the Centre (while some state governments remain with the Congress and its allies or other regional parties), there has been an unspoken yet tangible (i.e. qualitative and quantitative) shift in the public sphere and in the individual consciousness of citizens towards a discriminatory consensus. This discriminatory consensus involves the assertion of a violent, bigoted, casteist, Hindu-chauvinist and male chauvinist ideology commonly referred to as Hindutva. Although aggressively asserted only sporadically before 2014, Hindutva has been present as a distinctive ideology in the subcontinent since the early 20th century.⁹ The primary objective of this ideology has been the (future) installation of a territorially expanded Hindu nation in which religious minorities such as Muslims, Christians and Sikhs would either reconvert to Hinduism under duress, become second-class citizens without fundamental rights in law or expelled entirely from the nation,

deprived of their citizenship and left stateless. Further, since the primary mode of existence envisioned for a Hindu-centric society retains caste-based hierarchies and idealizes the 'traditional' Hindu family headed by a male patriarch with strict restrictions on emancipation of women, there is little room for women's equality or Dalit equality in this imagined Hindu nation. Hindutva is a toxic combination of mythicized past sufferings and future glories for Hindus that serves to justify violence against minority groups in the present (Banaji, 2018; Bhatt, 2001; Brosius, 2002).

The dominance of Hindutva as an ideology has been consolidated since the BJP was able to capture state apparatuses through electoral victories at the central and state levels. The consolidation of Hindutva also has another component – a process of consolidating cultural control. Violence against religious minorities linked to an ideal of strong fearless Hinduism which emerges triumphant from all encounters and engenders pride in its adherents has proved to be a key strategy for gaining consent from the so-called 'majority' population. It has been utilized time and again in recent years by non-state Hindutva actors posing as civic groups to construct and enfold a caste-differentiated society into a [Hindu] majority. Thus, across the country there are individuals and groups who 'voluntarily' instigate and/or participate in spectacular acts of violence against vulnerable communities affiliated to minority religions. Such acts accelerate their political visibility amongst the higher echelons of Hindutva politics thereby sometimes giving them access to formal political power. Such acts also serve to create a mythology around their 'bravado' to protect Hinduism regardless of personal consequences and thus help to build local cadres who can be mobilized to support Hindutva outfits between and during elections.

These Hindutva-affiliated cadres with covert or open links to the ruling party operate at rallies and between elections to provoke and target Muslims. The cadres consist especially of men in their late teens, twenties and thirties who are looking for jobs and feel victimized by 'reservation policies', so-called 'minority appeasement' policies and by many other pro-poor or social reform-oriented welfare policies. Their view of all social justice-oriented policies is that these penalize and exempt their own group simply because they happened to be born into dominant castes; this gives rise to an over-flow of resentment against anyone seen to support or benefit from reservation policies.

The privileged caste-based social positions occupied by Hindutva cadres tend to sit uneasily alongside what they view as their lack of economic progress compared to the prosperity of those above them (whether it is caste or class terms). An ensuing sense of victimhood demands some counter response to right the imagined wrongs done to them. Playing on this sense of victimization and resentment, Hindutva leaders at various levels and in several different organizations from the RSS to the ABVP engage in a competitive, vicious and spiraling

⁸ 'Pasmanda' refers to a relatively recent signifier of political subjectivity for Dalit and 'Other Backward Classes' Muslims. For more details, see <https://theprint.in/opinion/indias-muslim-community-under-a-churn-85-backward-pasmandas-up-against-15-ashrafs/234599/>

⁹ A key marker for the stabilization and consolidation of the Hindutva ideology is the establishment of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925. The RSS is the mother organization from which the *Sangh Parivar* (the Family) has emerged, including the BJP but also Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Organization), Bajrang Dal, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad and more recently, many other localized variants. See Damle and Andersen (1987) and Jaffrelot (2007) for more detailed history of Hindutva.

cycle to instigate increasingly horrifying and spectacular acts of violence against Christians and Muslims. Rather than putting a stop to this violence, actors in government and civil society – administrators, police officials, judges, media persons, spiritual and business leaders – have largely succumbed to the Hindutva narrative and failed to even nominally support those affected by atrocity, violence and discrimination. More disappointing, those with influence and responsibility in media, government and civil society have been only too eager to demonstrate their allegiance to the perpetrators and their Hindutva cause, whether through fear, for cynical reasons of survival or as Hindu nationalists themselves.

Hostility from State (administration, police, legislature and judiciary)

Of the four states we visited for field research, two were ruled by the BJP while the other two states were ruled by regional parties that were currently not allied to the BJP although these parties had not necessarily been permanently hostile to the BJP in the past. In the BJP ruled states, there was a clear incentive for the political leadership to adopt more hardline Hindutva in both discourse and practice. This was because it has become common-sense for state level leaders to emulate hardline Hindutva politics in the wake of Ajay Bisht (also known as Yogi Adityanath, whom the BJP appointed Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh in 2017 after a BJP win). Bisht has been the most aggressive of the Hindutva leaders (balancing the soft developmental discourse from Prime Minister Modi), regularly making statements against Muslims and encouraging religious vigilantism against Muslims. BJP leaders from other states seem to have convinced themselves that in order to flourish in the ruling party, they must emulate Bisht's incendiary and discriminatory politics. In the other states, the dynamics are more localized wherein individual constituencies or districts that are controlled by the BJP directly or indirectly encourage violence and harassment of minority groups. In these areas, even the ruling party leaders (of regional parties) or leaders from opposition parties (such as Congress) rarely support religious minorities explicitly (if at all) since they fear that their support of religious minorities will reduce their vote from the Hindus or lead to allegations of minority favoritism.

Given this background, regional leaders at the state level and downwards have all more or less internalized that the targeting of religious minority groups will yield electoral results. Therefore, anti-Christian and anti-Muslim rhetoric and action is perceived as a proxy for addressing economic problems, infrastructural development and so on. As a result, right from the highest office of the Prime Minister all the way down to the district or village level officials, Indian government machinery has in different ways sanctioned the persecution of religious minorities. The Prime Minister himself has failed to address vigilantism by maintaining a studied silence.

Meanwhile, state level governments have passed laws that provide pretexts for the indiscriminate arrest of young Muslim men on the charge of 'love jihad' and the arrest and/or levying of fines against Christians for converting Hindus, marrying Christians, or claiming benefits. These laws and the daily harassment and/or violence that they enable are perceived by citizens loyal to the government and to Hindutva politics as leaders staying true to the Hindutva cause by converting political rhetoric into concrete legislation. Police officials refuse or inordinately delay the filing of complaints against Hindu vigilantes. If after much effort religious minority groups succeed in filing a complaint, then police are also quick to file a counter complaint by the vigilantes. In notable cases, the police have been onlookers and even enabled vigilante mobs to perpetrate violence with impunity as they target religious minorities with excessive and disproportionate charges for attempting to fight back or gain justice formally. The rationale for these tactics is to tie courageous Muslims, Christians and Human Rights defenders up with so much paperwork and legal procedure that most of them become discouraged or give up altogether.

Administrative officials delay compensation or use government machinery to demolish homes and intimidate religious minorities with various kinds of paperwork. In the lower courts, judges do not take such cases seriously, fail to hold governments accountable and on other occasions, have allowed cases to drag on for years leading to petitioners losing all expectations of getting justice. Overall, the complete abandonment of religious minorities by both their elected representatives as well as the government machinery has left them with an overwhelming sense of isolation since they are already living in oppressive social conditions, surrounded by a culture of majoritarianism. After witnessing first-hand the selective application of laws and rules against them and in favor of the majority groups, they are feeling a sense of resignation about their future.

The role of mainstream media and social media

The role of the media in discrimination, dehumanization and violence against Christians and Muslims in India deserves attention for several reasons. First amongst these is the ability of both mainstream and social media to dominate daily meaning-making practices related to political, economic, cultural and spiritual life. Whether it is prime-time news programming that is consumed by families with enough economic means over the evening meal or whether it is Facebook, WhatsApp and ShareChat messages sent between relatives and/or friends, or comments over Twitter, the significance of events from everyday life is highly mediated. This mediation of events provides a narrative consistency that helps users to make sense of the bewildering complexity of modern life. On the other hand, in India today, despite a strong public service media and ethos from the 1950s to the 1990s, print, television and radio media ownership is highly concentrated in the hands of a few large business families that have a variety of competing interests (ranging from telecom to aviation, mining, gas and



Image ©Unsplash

oil, retail, shipping and so on). Social media companies while headquartered in the US and subject to American laws have consolidated their presence in India by acquiring stakes in the same large Indian corporate houses that already control mainstream media. Heads of editorial and decision-making teams are often political appointees or veteran journalists and technologists who have sympathy for the Hindutva cause.¹⁰ This background becomes a structural disincentive for both mainstream and social media to challenge discriminatory speech, let alone disinformation, propaganda or inciting speech.

Amongst our research subjects, the importance of media narratives is understood and mentioned repeatedly by perpetrators and victims alike. Those at the receiving end of dehumanizing and unjust media attention or representation have told us that one of the first things that vigilante mobs do is to snatch phones so the victims are unable to document violence in the way that they choose to or wish to. However, in what has come to be a bizarre ritual of Hindutva vigilantism, perpetrators unfailingly make digital records of their own violent actions and then post it to various social media platforms. This kind of posting serves several purposes: first, it advertises the perpetrators to other Hindutva groups and politicians as bold Hindu nationalists and consolidates their reputation for safeguarding Hinduism. Second, it serves as a warning to the police that the groups do not see their violence as being against the law. Third, it serves as a warning to other groups affiliated with the victims in the posts – if you tangle with us, then we will do to you what is being done to these people/persons. In these posts, the Hindutva perpetrators spread disinformation about individuals or groups. This usually accuses Muslims, Christians or Dalits of smuggling cattle, possessing beef, forced or paid religious conversion, attempts at religious intermarriage and so on. They therefore frame their violent attacks against minorities as a form of ‘civic’, patriotic and religious duty to prevent such attributed behavior. Further, when incidents of violence and discrimination occur, mainstream media systematically exclude victims’ accounts from their reportage. Such decisions are often not the direct decision of beat reporters but rather reflect the ethos and say so of the institutional hierarchy which is either risk averse or loyal to powerful Hindutva organizations and parties. As a result, local television and newspapers who cover such instances often echo the version pushed by Hindutva mobs and vigilantes or, in the circumstance that the violence is particularly gruesome and cannot be easily explained away, then the whole incident is simply not reported. As a study on inciting speech on mainstream media in Karnataka argues, ‘we must look at the problematic dimensions of media coverage from the lens of the conceptual distinction between hate speech and speech which ‘shocks, offends and disturbs’. While the freedom to shock and offend should come within the constitutional recognition of freedom of speech and expression, hate speech must be subject to criminal prosecution’.¹¹

Finally, social and mainstream media delineates ‘evidence’ in two ways. First, video recordings are increasingly used as *legal evidence* in courts by lawyers representing both Hindu vigilantes and the victimized religious minority groups. In this sense, outcomes are mixed since both parties use video and photographic evidence towards their respective ends. The acts of violence against Christians and Muslims themselves often become secondary, even in police station FIRs and courts of law, to the narrative of why the violence was perpetrated. The importance of evidence from digital and social media content is likely to continue although it remains unclear how questions of authenticity, accuracy and multiplicity of narratives will be resolved within legal disputes until there is a change

¹⁰ For instance, the Head of Facebook India, Anki Das was exposed as a political Hindutva supporter in a number of damning reports by the *Wall Street Journal* in August 2020 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-hate-speech-india-politics-muslim-hindu-modi-zuckerberg-11597423346>; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-executive-supported-indias-modi-disparaged-opposition-in-internal-messages-11598809348>

¹¹ <https://hatespeechbeda.wordpress.com/2020/09/08/report-wages-of-hate-journalism-in-dark-times/>

in political orientation around the courts. Secondly, especially social media posts serve as *social evidence*. These posts are effective as social evidence because videos/images seem to provide compelling evidence that conversion to Christianity is indeed taking place or that Muslims were indeed smuggling cattle and so on. However, since victims are never actually allowed to articulate their side of the story in these videos, the vigilantes are able to anchor the meanings of these visuals with disinformation that usually is an outright fabrication – for instance, through spoken commentary or through a textual description appended to the videos, a routine private prayer meeting amongst Christian Adivasis is labelled as a “secret meeting to convert Hindus into Christianity”. Given that social media companies and platform owners have by and large failed to contain (either through takedowns or temporary suspension of accounts, pages etc.) such disinformation even at the national level, let alone at the local district/village level, it thrives unchecked, perpetuating the ‘common-sense’ understanding of wrongdoing by religious minority individuals and groups, and maintaining the narrative of ‘defense of Hinduism and/or Indian nation’ on the part of the violent perpetrators.

When it comes to popular imaginaries targeted at religious minorities, for example the alleged complicity or intention of Muslims¹² in spreading Covid-19 to Hindus or that Christians are forcibly converting Hindus to Christianity, it is clear that mainstream media play a key role in legitimizing and strengthening such imaginaries. These imaginaries are then ‘taken up’ by social media users both through individual accounts and through pages or groups on closed messaging apps such as WhatsApp. In this last discussion section, we make several recommendations towards preventing discrimination and violence against religious minorities, specifically geared to address such phenomena on social media.

Where next?

Discriminatory, dehumanizing and inciting speech flourishes on social media because users are able to operate with a sense of impunity which in turn has become normalized amongst far-right users. In part, this impunity comes from a failure of the administration, police and courts to provide justice and from direct or indirect valorization of such speech by the ruling party. However, that sense of impunity can also be partly attributed to the failure of social media companies to act decisively, quickly and accurately. Too often, social media companies have taken cover under the notion of free speech, itself framed as a neutral commitment to enabling or disabling speech on ‘both sides.’ Given that a significant number of lynchings and other forms of violence and human rights violations have taken place in a very public and mediated fashion, it is important for social media companies to respond in the same terms, i.e. to recognize every citizen’s universal and constitutional right to practice and

propagate their religion freely and without fear; and further to respond with an explicit commitment to protect those rights when it comes to speech on their platforms and applications. Without this explicit commitment, inciting speech targeted at religious minorities will continue to thrive and be amplified on social media.

One key recommendation is for social media companies to increase the number of moderators who can address specific issues. Just as Facebook has undertaken an overhaul of its algorithms and tripled the size of their moderation team to identify and address racialized inciting speech against Black groups in the US,¹³ it is recommended that all significant social media companies vastly increase the size of their moderation teams and overhaul their algorithms to specifically address hate, discriminatory and inciting speech against religious minority groups in the subcontinent, including and especially the ways in which caste and gender identity intersect with religious identity. Our research showed that most of the content targeting religious minority groups on social media is produced and shared in regional languages. These moderators should have high competence in regional languages and regularly familiarize themselves with the diverse imaginaries that are circulating in the public sphere targeting religious minorities. They would also need to be familiarized with the genealogies of these imaginaries, so they are able to protect the speech of users who counter misinformation and discriminatory or inciting speech; and take down speech that threatens or harms religious minorities accurately and urgently. The best way to achieve this is to constitute a special group consisting of experts who can also serve as representatives of different groups who have faced historical exclusion and violence in India (including religious minority groups) and empower them to shape Facebook’s content policies and community standards.

In many cases, violence against religious minorities is enabled by the mobilization of mobs who openly discuss their plans and make their intentions clear on platforms where the content is publicly visible and accessible. For example, vigilantes and local BJP leaders livestreamed their speeches on Facebook just days before the pogrom. In other instances, there is clear evidence of ‘coordinated inauthentic behavior’ through bulk copy-pasting of misinformation and other forms of manipulation. Our recommendation is that in such cases, it is imperative that social media companies immediately take down the concerned content and suspend the user from the platform so it sends a discouraging signal to other users who may be similarly inclined. While there are significant challenges with addressing encrypted speech directly, we recommend that at the very least, social media companies begin by acting urgently on unencrypted speech that is publicly available on their platforms. In many cases, users propagating problematic speech on messaging apps also have associated accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. where similar speech can be observed. In such cases, those users’ can be warned and/or suspended for repeated violations.

¹² <https://hatespeechbeda.wordpress.com/2020/04/25/report-on-vandalism-at-padarayanapura-on-19th-april-2020/>

¹³ Source: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/12/03/facebook-hate-speech/>

Recommendations for the international community and international financial organizations

- 1** The international community should immediately convene an international fact-finding commission of violence and other human rights violations against religious minorities in India. The commission is to consider already documented cases and create an international monitoring mechanism including proper on-the-ground documentation training for both government and civil society members who are expected to participate in documenting instances of violence, intolerance, and discrimination against India's diverse religious minorities.
- 2** International civil society organizations working on preventing violence against religious minorities with support from researchers and grassroots activists should convene an international cross-platform commission to document new and emerging formulations of discrimination, dehumanization, disinformation and incitement against Christians and Muslims in English, Hindi, and all of India's vernacular languages in order to better sanction those circulating these on Social Media Platforms.
- 3** The international community should compile an exhaustive database of violence, discrimination and other human rights violations against minorities in India and offer pro-bono support by international legal teams to all of the victims/survivors regardless of their financial means.
- 4** All international financial organizations and international private investors who provide loans to or do business with the Indian government should take cognizance of the status of ongoing human rights violations, including pogroms and mob violence, against Christians, Muslims and other religious minorities in India, and link business and investment opportunities to the respect of the human rights of all Indians, including the inalienable right to hold, change and practice a religion or belief.
- 5** The international community should make the respect of the human rights of all Indians, including all religious minorities, conditional to any aid and/or trade agreement and establish monitoring mechanisms ensuring that such conditions are respected.
- 6** The international community should urgently censure far-right Hindutva state and non-state actors in India who play a role in encouraging, participating in, legitimizing and profiting from violence and discrimination against Christians and Muslims.
- 7** Any Indian politician or member of the police force and judiciary found to have colluded in anti-Christian and/or anti-Muslim pogroms, lynching, incitement, violence and other human rights violations should be brought to justice by both national and international law enforcement agencies, tried and held accountable.

Recommendations for social media corporations and media outlets

- 1** Corporations who own social media urgently need to **increase the number of moderators who can address specific local issues of discrimination, harassment and violence** circulating on their platforms and apps. Just as Facebook has undertaken an overhaul of its algorithms and tripled the size of their moderation team to identify and address racialized inciting speech against Black groups in the US, we recommend that all major social media companies vastly increase the size of their moderation team specifically to address discriminatory and inciting speech against religious minorities in India.
- 2** **All teams of content moderators** for social media companies **should have high competence in regional languages, receive training on international human rights standards** and be familiarized with the complex and diverse uses of Hindi, English, regional languages and dialects, and images, GIFs and memes to disguise disinformation, provocation, and incitement to violence and discrimination against Christians, Muslims and other minorities.
- 3** Corporations which own social media must **train their content moderation teams on the histories of interreligious relations and the patterns of media and social media coverage around the time of discriminatory and violent events, pogroms and mob violence** so they are able to protect the speech of users who counter misinformation and inciting speech, while taking down speech that incites to violence and discrimination against religious minorities, in line with Article 20 of the ICCPR.¹⁴
- 4** **Those reporting news nationally and internationally** - both from within India and from outside the country - **must receive religious literacy training**, with a focus on raising awareness of how the voices of ethnic and religious minorities may be missing, under- and even mis-reported in major media outlets.
- 5** **Social media companies should constitute special interest groups** (similar to Facebook's Oversight Board) consisting of experts and representatives of different groups who have faced historical exclusion and violence in India (including religious minority groups) and empower them to shape the platform's content policies and community standards.
- 6** All corporations who own social media must **upgrade the recruitment and training of their AI teams** with regard to the Indian social media sphere, international human rights standards, and overhaul their algorithms to specifically address dehumanization, discriminatory and inciting speech against religious minority groups in India and South Asia more broadly. This includes, but is not limited to, the ways in which caste and gender identity intersect with religious identity.
- 7** Violence against religious minorities is enabled by the mobilization of mobs who openly discuss their plans and make their intentions clear on platforms and cross platform apps where the content is publicly visible and accessible. All corporations who own social media **must immediately take down content that exceeds the threshold of advocacy of religious hatred according to Article 20 of the ICCPR** and suspend the offending user account across linked platforms to send a discouraging message to other users, networks and groups who may be similarly inclined.
- 8** While there are significant challenges with addressing encrypted speech (for instance on WhatsApp and Telegram), we recommend that at the very least, social media companies begin by **acting urgently on unencrypted speech that is publicly available on their platforms and that violates Article 20 ICCPR**: Facebook, Instagram, You Tube, TikTok and ShareChat. In many cases, users circulating inciting speech on messaging apps also have associated accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. where similar speech can be observed. In such cases, those users can be warned and/or suspended for repeated violations.

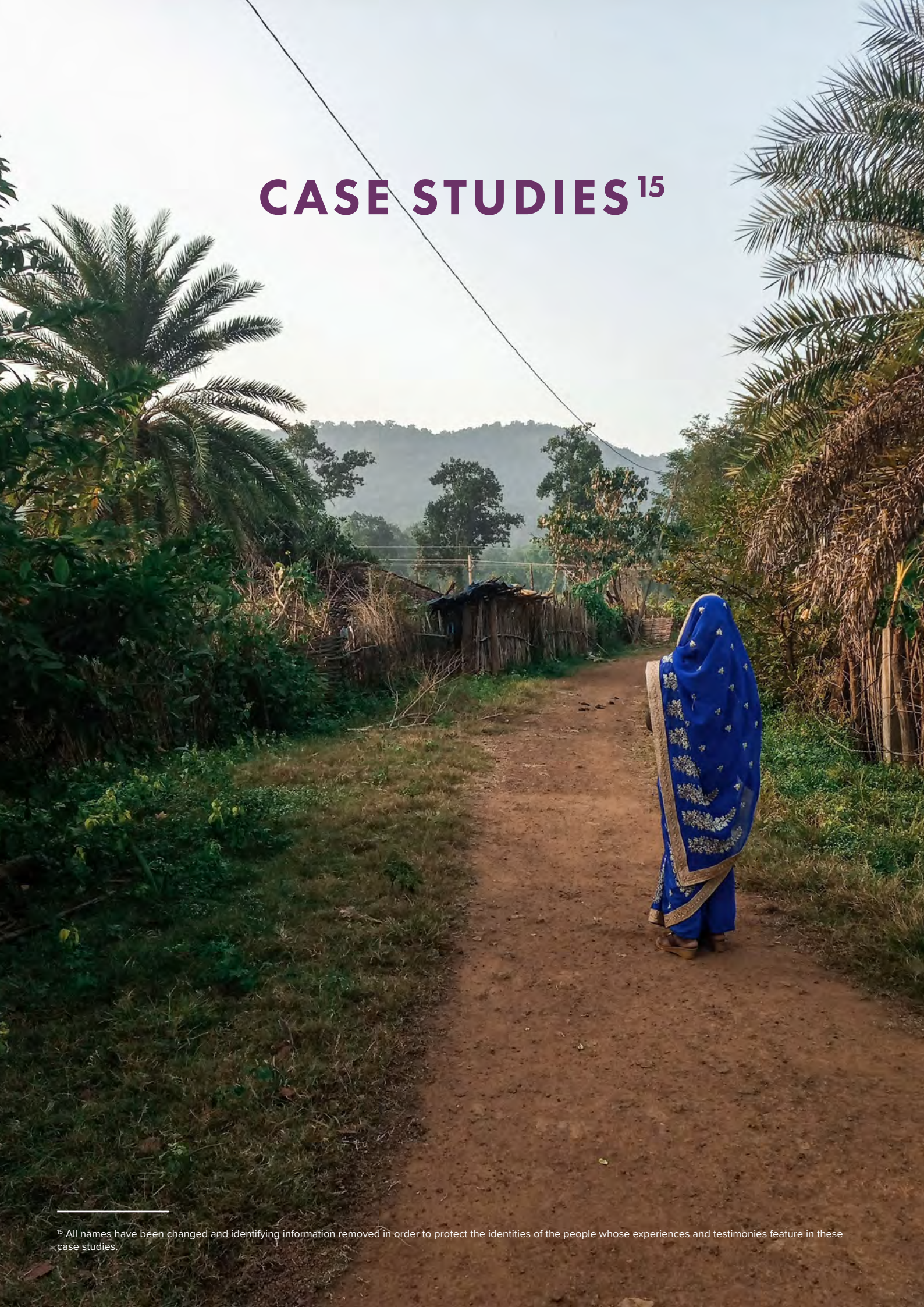
¹⁴ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

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CASE STUDIES¹⁵



¹⁵ All names have been changed and identifying information removed in order to protect the identities of the people whose experiences and testimonies feature in these case studies.

Case Study 1: Christians in Karnataka

On 31st January, 2021 in a village in Ramnagara District of Karnataka, Pastor Vipin organized a regular prayer meeting at his residence, where he has been conducting services for the past 30 years. Without warning, 25-30 muscular young men barged into the prayer meeting chanting 'Jai Shri Ram' [Hail Lord Ram]. They locked the pastor, his wife and three children into the house; snatched and damaged the Pastor's phone and then started documenting the violence they inflicted on the family. They held him by the arms, twisted his arms and beat and punched him mercilessly, leaving him with physical injuries. When his 13-year-old daughter tried to intervene, they kicked her in the stomach and knocked her to the ground.

Local context: a long history of Christian practice

The main occupations in this region are farming, agricultural labour, construction and industry. For the past decade, Bangalore has extended outwards to such villages in a quest for industrial space. An Industrial Park was approved by the Karnataka Industrial Areas Development Board in 2005, with the hope of generating jobs and remains in development. A substantial percentage (25%) of the local population is documented Scheduled Caste. For the last two terms, DK Shivkumar (known as DKS) from the Congress Party, is the Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA) of Kanakapura Taluk. As an opposition leader, DKS has gained popularity with religious minorities such as Christians and Muslims. Historically, the BJP has not had a stronghold in this constituency, while DKS has stood up strongly to support democratic plurality sentiments in his constituency and guarded it from becoming a site for intercommunal rivalry and violence. However, since 2019, after the construction of a Jesus Christ statue was sanctioned at Kapalabetta by DKS and his brother, rightwing Hindutva forces such as the Hindu Jagran Vedike among others, have gradually started to infiltrate the area and threaten local Christians. The Hindutva ideologue and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) functionary Kalladka Prabhakar Bhat, organized the 'Kanakapura Chalo' [Go to Kanakapura] march on January 13, 2020 and demanded that the 114 foot statue project be abandoned.

These actions among others, have given rise to a further movement amongst several rightwing groups to stir the anger of sympathetic Hindus around the trope of 'forced conversions' and the assumed historical significance of heritage and religious value of the site to Hindus. Since this incident, Christian crosses have been removed systematically, particularly on the outskirts of Bangalore.¹⁶ By proclaiming this geographical location a place of worship for Hindus, despite no evidence of such worship, rightwing Hindutva actors have made the Christian community appear guilty of 'illegally occupying' land and 'destroying Hindu culture'. (See Appendix 1)

"We, as Indians, have been living harmoniously in Karnataka. In all these years, we never felt that our religious freedom was being curtailed. But I can't understand why this sort of commotion is happening off late. I am surprised. I do not know if this issue is being politicized or if this is religious discrimination," said Fr Chinnappan¹⁷

Christianity in Kanakapura dates back to 1661 or even earlier. Some of the oldest churches in the state can be found here. The French Cemetery in Kanakapura, dating back 250 years, also indicates a significant historical presence of Christian communities in the area. Multiple generations of locals have sought education from Christian educational institutions belying assertions by Hindutva politicians and mobs that all of the Christian converts here are "from outside" the area, are "foreign" or "recent converts". In fact, for quite a while, local Hindu communities too resisted the narrative of Christians as interlopers. This film¹⁸ shows the support from the community, including Hindus, who feel the issue of the statue is being *communalized* by particular political interests.

Systematic discrimination fueled by the ruling party

As a Member of Parliament of Kodagu-Mysore, on the 24th of February 2021 BJP MP Pratap Simha directed local officials to identify local people moving around with crosses around their necks and to deprive them of any facilities being extended by the government to those in need.¹⁹ His exact words were:

¹⁶ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/bengaluru-christian-community-alleges-local-officials-removed-jesus-statue-without-cause#:~:text=A%20statue%20of%20Jesus%20Christ,burial%20ground%20for%20several%20years>

¹⁷ <https://www.thelede.in/karnataka/2020/01/22/locals-support-jesus-statue-despite-hindu-groups-protests>

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bj9H6u3o3Bk&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/karnataka/those-converting-to-christianity-cannot-claim-benefits-says-mp/article33927149.ece>

“When extending facilities to tribals, the officials should be a little cautious. They have to identify people moving around with crosses hanging from their necks. If they are drawing government facilities, they should be stopped.”²⁰

This injunction to discriminate in the allocation of resources based on the outward wearing of a symbol of faith at the behest of a BJP MP has led to several protests in Karnataka by the Christian community and by civil society groups.

Additionally, in 2021, aside from these ongoing incidents, a directive arrived from the High Court to the Municipal Corporation to undertake a survey of “illegal religious structures” with a requirement for builders to furnish legal title deeds, without which they are required to bring any structure down within a period of three months.²¹ Following this directive, there has been systematic damage to Christian religious icons and significant infringement on private and public property occupied by Christians. Dalit and Adivasi Christians have been the most common and easy targets. To our knowledge, there has been no equivalent harassment of those putting up potentially illegal Hindu structures without title deeds.

From discrimination to violence

On January 31st 2021, Pastor Vipin organized his regular prayer meeting at his residence, where he has been conducting services every Sunday, from 10:00 am to 12:45 pm, for the past 30 years. He has around 150-200 registered members in his congregation. On the date in question, there were about 30 believers who had gathered there. Most of the believers gathered hail from the Scheduled Caste (SC) community and follow a Pentecostal form of worship.

While the service was in progress, 25-30 well-built (‘gym bodies’) Hindutva boys and men barged into the prayer meeting chanting ‘Jai Shri Ram’. Many of the SC worshippers dispersed in fear. Those who tried to stop the Hindutva mob from entering and disrupting the meeting and were physically attacked and injured.

Pastor Vipin said that he sensed people walking around 12 noon, which was highly unusual and therefore suspected some danger, but had not anticipated anything so drastic as what actually occurred. Having injured some members of the congregation and driven others away, members of the Hindutva mob locked the door, with the pastor, his wife and three children inside. They snatched away the Pastor’s phone and damaged it. Then they themselves began using mobile phones to document the violence they were inflicting on the Pastor and his family. They held the Pastor by both his arms, twisted them and beat him mercilessly. They broke the tambourine used for hymns by smashing it against his wrists. When his 13-year-old daughter tried to come to her father’s defense, they kicked her in the stomach.

After assaulting the Pastor and his family physically and recording their assault, the mob left chanting Jai Shri Ram.

“I didn’t recognize any of these boys or men. I have been in this area for almost three decades, I recognize everyone. Besides, people here have great respect for me. They are from some other area; this was a planned action against Christians.” said Pastor Vipin.

Legal discrimination and police complicity with Hindutva mobs

After their attackers left, the family gathered themselves and went out to report the incident to the police station. Their experience there, however, was equally troubling.

“The Police accused me of converting people into Christianity. I asked him to check with any of the believers [who were present in the congregation], they are all recorded Hindu by Caste and Religion, none of them have a Christian certificate.”

It is a matter of agreement between all our interviewees that approximately 20 representatives from the BJP, the RSS and the Bajrang Dal also gathered at the Police Station and admitted that it was boys from their party who had carried out the attack. A representative of this group appeared to apologize for what the mob did in an attempt to get the Pastor to brush off the attack and back down from taking legal action. He, however, was steadfast in his purpose.

“I simply asked them one question, ‘if I did the same in front of your children and wife, what would you do? And when someone comes in between to stop the violence, you beat them harder?’ There was absolute silence.”

The Sub-inspector was unwilling to register the complaint initially, and tried to dissuade Pastor Vipin by threatening him, “you cannot

²⁰ <https://www.daijiworld.com/news/newsDisplay?newsID=805013>

²¹ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/bangalore/title-deed-sought-from-historic-churches-temple-mosques/article33891226.ece>

organize prayer meetings in your residence; it is against the law".
Pastor Vipin told us:

"I showed him the papers of the house that I have leased. I had put it in writing in the lease that I would use the house for prayer meetings. After I showed him the lease, the SI did not say anything. He was also suspicious because I was recording the conversation with him at which point, I showed him my broken phone as evidence of the violence."

Despite attempts at intimidation and dissuasion, Pastor Vipin managed to file a case against the attackers and is determined to fight the case.

People praying peacefully in a private property is not illegal anywhere in India, but our research team found that the police are hand in glove with rightwing Hindutva groups. Legitimate complaints by Muslim and Christian communities against mobs and individuals from these groups are rarely registered, while the complainants are often harassed and subjected to insulting or even aggressive behavior at the hands of the police. There is already a counter-case filed against Pastor Vipin, and he has procured bail with the help of support from his community. The complaint itself is apparently fabricated:

"A young boy of 18 has in his complaint stated that he was unwell and came to my church on Sunday. On not getting better, he asked for a reason. Apparently, I got angry and shouted back at him and his gods. I have never met this person in my life, I found out he is not even from our village. Such false charges, are becoming a trend in such cases, to cover up for the damage done."

Establishing their own complicity further, the police have not arrested a single one of the boys or men who comprised the mob that attacked Pastor Vipin, his family and his congregation. Meanwhile, three other persons have complained against members of the mob under the SC/ST Atrocity Act, since they are entitled to gain compensation from the Social Welfare Department for damage and loss. The process is underway, but these additional cases act as proof to strengthen Pastor Vipin's case.

Increasing discrimination and violence against Christians

Pastor Vipin lives on lease in his residence which doubles up as the church where believers come for prayers and Sunday service. He has registered a Trust, so that several of his activities are conducted under the aegis of this Trust. After this incident, his whole family was shifted to a nearby hospital for 24 hours. He left his residence for close to a month, and has recently returned to practice his religion.

He has been attacked twice before. Once in 2008 when his family were very isolated in the area. He remembered that the attackers in that case were from the *Kannada Rakshana Vedike* (a forum ostensibly to uphold the regional language Kannada against the influx of migrants to the city of Bangalore. They also hold Hindutva sentiments and claim to uphold Hindu religious morals against minority groups). Leading up to the incident the attackers had warned him not to continue working in these areas.

"I myself was in the RSS and the KRV, and I left both groups because I know how I was being used by the institutions to carry out particular kinds of actions. Thankfully I left the groups and found my path in Christianity. I was interrogated at the police station from 6 pm-11 pm about my efforts at conversion. When they found out I was not involved in such activity, they let me go." Said Pastor Vipin.

In 2010, Pastor Vipin was attacked again in his residence in front of 60-80 people. The mob at that time disrupted the prayer meeting, pushed him to the ground and shouted at him not to convert people. They destroyed his books and claimed that the books provided a basis for proving him guilty of converting people to Christianity.

After the recent attacks, members of the Bahujan Samajwadi Party, a national party representing the interests of Scheduled Castes, Tribes, and other minoritized groups, came to meet Pastor Vipin and offered support to him. They were deeply upset about what had happened to him and said he should not even have a counter-case filed against him. They promised to stand by him in the future and assured him of their support.

Many Dalits in this village now practice Hinduism and even though Pastor Vipin is only offering faith healing and prayer rather than attempting to convert them, local Dalit Hindu's skepticism has been fueled by false reports about conversions. Pastor Vipin puts this into context:

"When I came 20 years back, nobody wanted to work in Kankapura area because it was not easy to be an outsider here. Gaining trust was the biggest challenge. But I had faith in Jesus and there was a strong sense of intuition that led me here. I came here as a student to do social work. Initially I worked with people who were disabled, ill, jobless, and alcoholic. I moved here with my family in 2007. My work was mostly to help people in difficulty to overcome their challenges, just like me. I prayed and fasted for 40 days, and did not sleep. I had that sense of duty and responsibility."

This gave me the power to heal people, I did not come here for conversions. Many believers fear conversions, because they are threatened by locals who think that conversions are paid for by outsiders. So, they prefer to find peace and solace in this faith but would not convert to the religion. It is a very complex decision to convert. Everyone knows that they are not entitled to state benefits if they convert, hence they do not wish to lose their caste certificate."

This point is significant. Disregarding whether these believers would have had the courage or will to convert officially to Christianity in a less intimidating environment, the facts are that many believers and followers of Christianity in the region and across India have not officially converted for fear of being further harassed and discriminated against.

As a Dalit convert to Christianity, Pastor Vipin and his family cannot and do not claim any social or economic benefits. Pastor Vipin is an Ambedkarite Christian. While he reads the current scenario through the Bible, where persecution against Christians has been predicted in the future, he also understands it as an attempt to kill Ambedkarite anti-caste thinking and bring back Manusmriti, where Brahmins rule unopposed.

"If you are their slave, you stay as a Hindu Dalit. Where is justice, when laws are against us, when people blindly want to believe in the Hindutva project?"

He pointed out that political representation is mostly by Upper Castes. He believes the targeting of minorities is a way of winning votes, by building a Hindutva vote bank.

"If anyone reads between the lines in Modi's speeches, it is evident that he is against the poor. There is inflation and people do not have jobs. And the jobs that Dalits are given are the most difficult jobs because Brahmins themselves cannot do them. Modi wants to kill our spirit to question, to think. Everyone has a right to question. Every society is dominated by the upper castes. Had they supported fathers, independent churches, scheduled tribes, it would have been a different society today. We have completely lost our faith in the ruling Government.... In the Kanakapura Gram Panchayat, there are no votes for the BJP but RSS culture is slowly breeding. They want us to live in fear so that they can rule over us. We will not give up our faith no matter what. Let God use us to be the witness. Let Christians be protected from such violence."

Mainstream media complicity and silence; social media atrocity

Neither Kannada nor English language media reported the violence we have detailed in this case study. In the course of our interview, Pastor Vipin mentioned:

"The media is only interested in covering the MLA's²² daughter's birthday party, or the birth of a puppy, or exaggerating petty crimes. They are not interested in covering atrocity. They cannot be trusted."

The area has good internet connectivity and most people own smartphones. Most men use their phones for business, entertainment, and news. People are recipients of significant amounts of information and misinformation through WhatsApp groups, which are shaped by their community interests, with religious and political motivations playing a significant role.

The video shot by members of the Hindu extremist mob is the only evidence of the attack on Pastor Vipin and his congregation, other than the testimonies of those present and who were attacked. The Pastor explains to us that the attackers documenting their own violence is a trend, where videos about anti-Christian and anti-Muslim violence are made as a matter of pride. While we have no evidence of this in this particular case, he suspects that some of them might get paid for orchestrating such attacks, and that the video might be the only accepted proof of their action. And he feels it will likely be used on Facebook and other social media sites to threaten and incite fear in people. He felt that these videos will not be released immediately but during the course of a year, because it will become difficult to trace it back to the person.

Incidents like the one we have documented here continue unabated, with the full support and legitimization of the ruling BJP in Karnataka. No fewer than 14 crosses have been vandalized and removed following a complaint made by a Bajrang Dal activist who claimed forced conversions taking place in a church in Bangalore.²³ Standing against the vision of the RSS and Bajrang Dal, who have openly declared their intention of making India "free of Muslims and Christians by 31st March, 2021",²⁴ Pastor Vipin has resumed his service in April 2021 in the same residence. He tells us that his courage to continue comes from his determination to stand up for himself and for the word of God.

²² Legislative Assembly Member.

²³ <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/karnataka-civic-body-demolishes-jesus-statue-14-crosses-after-bajrang-dal-activists-complaint>

²⁴ <https://www.worldwatchmonitor.org/indias-anti-conversion-law-in-five-states-but-proposed-to-go-national/>

Other attacks against Christians follow the similar trajectory where pastors are not allowed to conduct Sunday service in peace.²⁵ They are intimidated and attacked in the following ways:

- False legal charges are slapped on them 295, 245 A, 153 A, 107 CRPC in the name of forced conversions which do not apply to Karnataka as the State does not have conversion laws and believers are protected under Article 25-30. Ensuring bail can take anywhere between 20-30 days.
- Physically assaulted in a public place or at place of worship, usually by a mob of 5-30 people. Girl children/wife of pastor are beaten badly and threatened publicly.
- Threatened and forced to leave the village.
- Destroying churches, hospitals, schools and private property belonging to Christians.
- Planting Saffron Flags, which have come to represent the ideology of Hindu supremacism or Hindutva, in Muslim and Christian places of worship.



²⁵ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/radical-hindus-attack-christian-pastors-in-india/91639#>

Case Study 2: Christians in Madhya Pradesh

On December 31st 2020 in a village in Madhya Pradesh's Barwani district, a new year's party was being organized by Adivasi Christians when a mob of Hindutva RSS men arrived unexpectedly and started beating members of the household on the trumped-up accusation of "conversions". The 25-30 strong mob forced their way into the house, abusing the 7-8 women who were inside. They harassed the women, snatched their mobile phones as they were trying to document the violence, and proceeded to assault some of those present. Sunita, an Adivasi Christian woman was 8 months pregnant at that time. A member of the Hindutva mob kicked her violently and she fell to the ground. She had to be rushed to the hospital and had a stillbirth due to the assault. Sunita's aunt, a middle-aged woman who tends the fields, cows and buffaloes and does not know how to use a mobile phone, told us that she was present in the house at the time of the incident and said:

"The mob of 25-30 men arrived in cars and on motorbikes. There were about 7-8 of us (Adivasi Christians) in the house at that time, including 4-5 girls. There were no prayers happening in the house at that time. We were just sitting and preparing things for the New Year's party in the evening. The mob came around 2-2.30pm. They held my husband [S] by his collar and started beating him violently. In the middle of this ruckus, Sunita was knocked down by one of them and they kicked her as well. They threatened us to not tell anyone about this otherwise they would return and kill us. I took her out of the back door to the neighbor's house from where we called for an ambulance. They took her to the nearest hospital".

Collusion of police with perpetrators

The next day, the family went to the police station to file a complaint but it was not filed so it appeared later. The police and other locals deny that any such incident took place. The police would only say that they received a complaint saying that "conversion" was taking place in the house. Most notably, Sunita's aunt recognized several of the RSS-men who were perpetrating the violence. She detailed the names of these perpetrators to the police but as she cannot read, she does not know if they wrote them down or what they are doing about it. Members of the RSS have since threatened further violence against the family if they pursue the matter legally. However, the family remain staunch and have approached the Indore High Court for justice. Sunita's uncle emphasized:

"If Adivasis fight with Hindus or with RSS people even to defend themselves, the police immediately file a FIR against the Adivasis. The police along with the RSS claim we are getting money from foreign sources to convert into Christianity."

Both Sunita's husband and uncle mentioned that instead of investigating the perpetrators, the police have been checking their (the victim's) bank account details (including bank accounts of relatives and friends who were present in the house at the time of the RSS attack) to seek out any untoward monetary transactions which might account for them becoming Christians.

"It feels like they don't need us [Christian Adivasis] in this society anymore."

Lack of political support

The local Legislative Assembly Member (MLA) is from the Congress party but has not come to visit the victims of this incident of mob violence. The family tried to get in touch with him but he refused to help, apparently telling them *"Both you and the Hindus vote for me. Moreover, the villagers are saying that 'this incident didn't happen'. You all are lying."*

There is little or no institutional support for Christianity in this region. The weekly prayer happens at home every Sunday. There is no church in the area: the nearest church is about 30 kilometers away. A church was built during the time of the Congress government in the state. A few years earlier there was an attempt to build a church nearby, but it was destroyed and the construction ceased.

Around three days after the violence against Sunita and her husband's aunt's household, while Sunita was still in pain and grieving for her stillborn baby, grassroots human rights organizations protested to increase pressure on the police to record a case; following this, the police were forced to conduct a post-mortem on the stillborn baby. Thus, it was that after 7 days, the remains of the baby were dug out and taken for post-mortem; the ensuing report said that the child "suffered no injuries". There is absolute silence from the local print and television media when it comes to amplifying Sunita's story of assault by a Hindutva mob. While many media houses sent reporters to observe the protest, nothing was reported in the papers or on local TV channels, strongly suggesting political intervention or intimidation. With great courage, and knowing that they will face further harassment and intimidation, Sunita and her family say that they want the case to be investigated and that the attackers should be punished. The truth should come out.

No Sunday prayer meetings have been held since the incident occurred. Sunita's aunt told us: *"t takes money to go to the other village to attend prayer every Sunday"*. People, who used to come for this meeting, have called her and said- *'if you start the prayer again, we will come or let us start the prayer group in another village.'* But, now fearful, she has not gone out in two months. Nor have other neighbors in the village come and spoken to the family since the violence against them took place. This could be a sign of complicity with the attackers and/or of anxiety about becoming the butt of similar attacks were they to show solidarity with Christian victims.

The endless search for justice

The family all maintain that they want the case to be investigated, that the attackers should be punished. They are more determined than ever that the truth should come out. In their view, they at least want public recognition of the violence they endured because they are Christian. They are willing to take the risk that justice will not be delivered by the courts, in order to even get a chance that their experiences of harassment, violence and loss at the hands of the RSS mob are being heard and acknowledged. They explained to us that their desire for justice is not merely selfish as they feel that what happened to them today, , could happen tomorrow to someone else. However, it has not been easy. Sunita and her husband have been under pressure from within the family as well to not pursue the case because of the high risk associated with taking on the Hindu chauvinist mobs, officials and police.

We conclude with Sunita's uncle's powerful words:

"For us, [whether we are Christian or something else], Adivasi is only our religion. But while making the caste certificate, when we write "Adivasi" as our religion they don't accept, they change it to Hindu. In our community everyone is free to follow whatever religion they want to. It has always been fluid among us. But now we are being forced by the administration to follow one particular religion. They ask us, 'why don't you say Ram-Ram?' We will say Ram-Ram and we will say other words of respect for other religions also, but they cannot force us to say only one thing. Actually, there is no value for Adivasi life, they treat us like animals and put us to fight each other."



Case Study 3: Christians in Jharkhand

Garhwa is a district in the state of Jharkhand and shares its border with Bihar, South Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh. As such, it is home to a mixed population, comprising of Adivasis, Hindus and Christians. Meera's village in Garhwa is home to a high percentage of Adivasi Christians. It also has a significant population of Banias, an upper caste community²⁶. The Adivasi population in the area primarily engages in daily wage work and a significant population also migrates to find work in bigger cities and towns.

Here we report the case of Meera, whose husband was attacked by self-proclaimed 'Gau Rakshaks' (cow protectors) in August 2017. His leg was slashed with a sword and due to medical negligence from the police, he died in jail three days after the attack.

A large cross marks the entrance to Meera's village. She recounted that:

"In many of the villages in this area, Adivasi Christians have saved money and built a cross for their village. In the last two years, groups affiliated to the (erstwhile BJP) government have repeatedly destroyed the crosses. They ride by on motorbikes and throw stones at the crosses. They come in the dead of the night and vandalize the crosses. We wake up to see our cross in ruins. In the forest of a mountain close by, there was a cross built. Every month, the Adivasis from this area would go on a pilgrimage to pay respect to it. It was destroyed one year ago. After rebuilding it, a group of Adivasis stayed guard for four nights to ensure it was not broken again. Tell me, have you ever heard of a temple being destroyed?"

A history of anti-Christian and anti-Muslim violence

In the last three years, Garhwa has emerged as one of the hotbeds of violence and discrimination against Adivasi Christians and the Muslim community.²⁷ The violence, most often propagated by members of the dominant Hindu community, is legitimized by the Freedom of Religion Act that aims to restrict the number of forceful conversions and the Jharkhand Bovine Animal Slaughter act that has deemed cattle slaughter and trade illegal. Both laws have been interpreted as an attack on the occupation and lifestyle of Adivasi Christian and Muslim communities in Jharkhand.²⁸

Meera was born into a Christian family, and her husband Ravi, a member of the Oraon²⁹ tribe, converted to Christianity after their marriage. In her view, their life in the village had been relatively untroubled until the time when her husband was entrapped and attacked by Hindutva vigilantes.

A Hindutva mob entraps and attacks Christian laborers: a common modus operandi

On the day of the incident, Ravi and others had gone to Barkol, a neighboring district, to collect fertilizer for a farming related job. Ravi was a driver, transporting people and goods as need be. Meera was waiting for him to return with the fertilizer, and after 6 pm she began to get worried. She tried calling him, but his phone was switched off. She assumed he had stayed with his friends elsewhere because it had gotten late.

The next morning, a neighbor from the village came to her house.

"He asked me if I had seen the news. I asked him what news? I did not have a smartphone at that time, and I do not read the newspaper. He took out his bada mobile (smartphone) and showed me a video. My husband, brother-in-law, and the friends he had gone with were sitting outside the picket³⁰ (CRPF camp) in [redacted]. There was a dirty bandage wrapped around my husband's leg. He was bleeding profusely. I could not bring myself to watch anymore. How could I believe WhatsApp? I left immediately to [redacted] to find out what happened to him."

²⁶ 'Bania' is a sub-caste comprised mainly of merchants and traders, classified as belonging to the Vaishya category (traders), the third strata of the four-tiered *varna* or caste-system (i.e. below priests or Brahmins and warriors or Kshatriyas). Bania castes represent the dominant business interests both at the national level but also at the hyper local level.

²⁷ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/jharkhand-tribal-families-caned-fined-in-conversion-backlash/articleshow/80640941.cms#:~:text=GARHWA%3A%20Three%20Korwa%20tribal%20families,on%20January%202022%2C%20sources%20said>

²⁸ <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/in-one-jharkhand-dist-53-booked-in-cow-slaughter-cases-in-6-years-all-acquitted-6046464/>

²⁹ Oraon is the name of an indigenous group living in the central Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha as well as West Bengal.

³⁰ In this context picket is the term used to refer to the camps set up by the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF). CRPF personnel are deployed to combat the Maoists or Naxalites in the central Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha and to a lesser extent, in various other states of India.

Meera carried a simple meal of potato curry with her to the police station, thinking her husband might be hungry. When she reached the police station, the constable taunted her with a common stereotype about Christians, Dalits and Adivasis, saying:

“Aloo sabzi ki saath kyun aye ho? Beef nahi lekar aayi?” [“Why have you come with potatoes and vegetables? Were you unable to get beef?”]

Given the details of the case that emerged, this taunt was highly sinister. She recalls the two hours she spent at the station as mental torture at the hands of the police who continuously made casteist slurs about Adivasi Christians and their way of life.

She was told that her husband deserved what happened to him for eating beef. She repeatedly asked them where her husband was, without receiving any response. Finally, a truck brought her husband and the others to the station. They tried to plead with the police, saying they had gone to buy fertilizer.

The story emerged that someone (an Adivasi Christian) had tried to sell them an old ox while they were in the area. At that moment, the mob had descended, declaring they had caught Ravi and others in the act of cattle trading. A mob of over 100 people gathered. The mob also beat up others in the area, who were also Adivasi Christians. They also dragged a few girls and women out of their houses and sexually harassed them, loudly chanting that the entire community had to be punished for the slaughter of the cow and the sale of beef.

When the man who sold the ox was interrogated by the police, he confessed that he had been forced to sell the ox to Ravi and the others at a specific time and place. He confirmed that it was a set-up, a form of entrapment. When Meera finally saw her husband, all he told her was to collect his license and to keep it safely. She sensed his doubt and fear about whether he would survive:

“He knew he was going to die. I could see it in his eyes. He didn’t tell me anything about what happened, he just kept crying.”

Meera blames the police for the death of her husband.

“He was found at the picket at 10 am bleeding profusely. They only put one bandage on his leg. He was transported to the police station only at 4 pm, even though the case was reported to the police at 10 am. For the three days he spent in jail after that, he did not receive any medical attention. If they had given him stitches, he would have survived. It is just another example of how cheap Adivasi lives are, for the administration.”

After his death, the police offered Meera compensation as per the Scheduled Caste and Tribe Atrocities Act. She says she was offered Rs. 20,000. She initially refused the money.

“Is that how much my husband is worth? Rs 20,000?”

But since she now had to support herself and four children, she eventually agreed. She was also promised monthly rations to support the household but only received this for the first month following the incident. She was also promised daily wage work that would ensure a steady income, but no work was given. At the time of this interview, Meera shared that she was under pressure from a local bureaucrat to return the money she received as compensation. She feels this is because she has refused to compromise the case against the accused.

She has no faith in the local media.

“The media here acts like a pimp for the administration. In the local papers they reported that my husband and friends were caught slaughtering a cow. Some members of the local administration in [redacted] (all affiliated with the BJP) signed as witnesses on the FIR saying they had witnessed the slaughter taking place. This is a complete lie.”

Memory and justice

[Redacted] district is a BJP stronghold. Meera heard from the others who survived the attack that the mob who attacked her husband comprised of 10 to 12 people. They were primarily Tiwari and Yadav, members of upper caste and OBC (Other Backward Caste) communities. When the police came to arrest the accused, the village head in the area rescued 3-4 people from being arrested by claiming that they were in her house eating a meal, at the time of the attack. After she filed her complaint, Meera was then put under constant pressure by the local administration to compromise; yet she remained staunch in her resistance:

“I told them clearly, you can kill me, but I will not compromise this case. I will not let you forget what you did to my husband.”

Our researchers were shown her file which is full of all the papers pertaining to the case. She has kept all of them meticulously, though she shared with us that she now has little faith in the legal process. She missed her last court hearing because she was unwell and does not have any money to travel to court.

"I received Rs 10,000 from the bail hearing of two of the accused. Four people have received bail, but their amount still hasn't reached me."

She is concerned about how to pay for her children's education, something she is determined to do.

"Because Adivasis are not very literate, they take advantage of us."

The only other money she received was from an NGO in Delhi, who visited her after her husband's death and gave her Rs. 25,000.

A history of caste-based discrimination

According to Meera, this is not the first time Yadavs³¹ have attacked Adivasi Christians. She remembers an incident where they poisoned the goats belonging to the Oraon Adivasis.³² When asked when she feels this unrest began, she traces it back to the formation of the picket camp (CRPF camp).

"When the party³³ was in power, there was no communal unrest. We lived peacefully. They made sure that the Banias were kept in check. The first house I lived in, I got it through the Awas Yojana,³⁴ with the help of the party. Ever since the Awas Yojana were suppressed by the government, and the picket camp was set up, the Adivasis have been in trouble. It is thanks to the Naxals that the Adivasis have survived this long. Now the Zamindars,³⁵ the Banias and the Yadavs pay money to the picket camp and do whatever they wish to in this area." She gives the example of the local market to substantiate her point. Most of the shops would be owned by the Adivasis, but in the last four to five years, the market has been taken over by the Banias and the Yadavs. "The Adivasi shops are evicted without notice; we can no longer sell our wares. They bribe the CRPF and set up their shops. We do not go to the police to file cases, because most Adivasis fear that cases will be filed against them instead. We'd rather just keep quiet."

Her brother-in-law who survived the attack told her that one of the Yadavs who was responsible, used to be a Naxal.³⁶ He revealed this as he was tying their hands with rope,

"He said he learnt how to tie the tightest knot during his training as a Naxal." "These people are power hungry."

"Earlier they sided with the Naxals because they were powerful, now they are siding with the BJP."

Though the local authorities are meant to facilitate the building of houses for Scheduled Tribe communities under the Awas Yojana, often they pocket the money meant for the development of the area. There are cases where vehicles belonging to Adivasi Christians are randomly stopped and fines are collected.

Meera remembers the torture she faced from other communities after the death of her husband.

"Every time I used to go to the market, they (the Banias and Yadavs) would taunt me, asking me if I was carrying beef in my bag."

Additionally, not everyone within the Adivasi Christian community supported her. She remembers one incident where a protest was organized in support of her by a few people in the village (she feels the party was also responsible for this protest, in an underground

³¹ Yadav is a sub-caste dominant in North India although they are spread over the country. In most states they are classified as part of Other Backward Classes (OBC).

³² Oraon is the name of an indigenous group living in the central Indian states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha as well as West Bengal – they are a subgroup of Adivasis.

³³ She is referring to the Communist party of India (Maoist). According to A, from the late 90s, till 2006, Garhwa was known as a maoist stronghold. When the BJP government came to power in Jharkhand, they launched a series of violent attacks against the Naxals. In Barkol, a Central Reserve Police Force camp was established in 2004 to police the district and ensure there were no Naxals operating in the area.

³⁴ Awas Yojna is a scheme administered by the office of the Prime Minister of India to subsidise housing for those below the poverty line. Awas Yojna translates as 'Housing Scheme'.

³⁵ Zamindar is a common phrase in various Indian languages for landlord.

³⁶ Naxals, sometimes also used interchangeably with the term Maoists. The appellation Naxals makes reference to the village of Naxalbari in West Bengal where a peasant revolt took place in 1967. The revolt then spread and led to the splintering of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and formation of Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) or CPI (ML). All contemporary Naxalite groups operating in various parts of India can be traced back to the CPI (ML).

manner), but other Christians, (she referred to them as Dalals/Pimps for the Upper caste Hindus) told her they would make her life difficult if she attended. She is also upset with the previous church with which she was affiliated. After her husband's death, she had fallen extremely ill. During that time, she had requested the church to take care of her son, but they refused to do it for free.

"I am fighting this battle on my own."

The price of justice

Last month, Meera bought herself a smartphone, at the behest of her lawyer, so that she could keep up with updates on her case. She does not know what happened to the video of her husband being beaten, or where it was circulated. She suspects it was used to show other people how brave and bold the attackers are, to build suspicion against Adivasi Christians. She routinely watches news on WhatsApp and YouTube.

"I wasn't very aware about the attacks against Christians until what happened to my husband. Then I began to realize his was not an isolated case. Here in [redacted], there are so many cases of people being caught and tortured on the pretext of cow slaughter. There are cases in the neighboring village too. These cases don't get any proper investigation by the police or the media."

Meera however, was not aware of the Freedom of Religion Act passed in 2017. After the incident her relationship with everyone in the village has become strained. Now she refrains from sharing news with anyone, preferring to watch uplifting stories about conversion on YouTube, to understand the predicaments people find themselves in, and the healing power of Christ.

"There are no forceful conversions. If people want to convert, it is their choice. In our area, in the last 2-3 years, many people have fallen sick, and that is why they converted. People from across communities are converting, even Hindu people. Our church might be small, but our heart is big."

Meera misses her husband, and often feels lonely. The walls in her mud house are bare save two framed photographs of Ravi. Her children inquire after their father, the youngest had seen the police visit their house. He believes the police killed his father. Sometimes he sings his father's favorite songs.

"When he sings, I tell him not to. It brings back memories. It is not pleasant."

She remembers a time when everyone in the village used to gather to resolve disputes internally.

"Now everyone directly approaches the picket and tries to make some money. The picket is controlled by the BJP-RSS. They rule everywhere, from the local block office to the judge in the highest court."

It is only her faith that gives Meera some solace.

"After my husband's death, I would see blood stains everywhere. On the bed, near the gas. At night as I slept, I could hear someone running furiously on the roof. I moved houses but I could still sense an unhappy presence. It was only when I left the church I used to attend earlier and shifted to Mercy [church] that this stopped. I felt a sense of peace.... "With mercy, the pastors will pray with you at any time of day. Even if you call them at 1 am, they will pray with you on the phone."

However, she insists that not everyone can adjust to the life that Mercy demands. It requires one to live a chaste life.

"In Mercy, we don't wear sindoor and mangalsutras.³⁷ I wear the sindoor sometimes when I go to Ranchi, just to ensure the respect given to a married woman. But every time I put it on, my head hurts. Our faith is that strong."

She told us of two incidents where the men who broke the crosses (mentioned above) were found on their deathbeds crying and repenting the destruction. According to Meera, their act of violence came back to haunt them. When we asked what justice means for her, Meera told us in calm but sorrowful words:

"I wish for the men who killed my husband to be in jail. But they have money and I do not. I do not know why the Lord is putting me through so much hardship, but there must be a reason. Even after everything that has happened to me, I am somehow able to run my house and bring up my children. So many people have wondered how I have been able to survive. It is due to the Lord. So, I will hold his hand and he will get me through this."

³⁷ Sindoor is the red powder worn on the forehead by married Hindu women and Mangalsutra is the marriage chain worn by married Hindu women.

Case Study 4: Christians in Odisha

Shilpa, a young woman in her early twenties, who belongs to an SC community (see below), was attacked by her family and by Hindutva aggressors from neighboring villages. The case took place in a small town in Southern Odisha, not too far from where the 2008 Kandhamal violence had spread. The local pastor and our contact, Pastor Sachin, described the area as an area where the RSS is very strong. Our research suggests that the RSS presence had become stronger after the Kandhamal pogrom. Today this and nearby towns are the main Hindutva far right and RSS strongholds in the area. The incident we covered in the area is not isolated. There have been three other incidents that have taken place in the same area and with the same church.

We were referred to this case by Rajesh a High Court lawyer based in Cuttack. Rajesh took up the case out of personal interest as a Christian lawyer who follows up on such cases but also because of the way in which it was handled by the police. Specifically, the way the young girl who was attacked in the church was made to sign a document indemnifying the attackers; and how the assistant Pastor Sudhir and his wife Jaya, who ran the church, were made to sign a document which essentially made them admit to forced conversions. We travelled to this town on the 14th of February to meet with Rajesh's contact on the ground – the senior Pastor Sachin. Pastor Sachin was not present when the attack took place but knew the victim personally as well as the incident as it happened in his church. He described the context and incident as follows.

The events of June 2020

In June 2020, when Shilpa was severely ill and did not get the attention she required from her family members to initiate a cure, a friend suggested she would go to the nearby church and ask the pastor to pray for her. By her own account she was “cured” and since then decided to follow Christianity. Pastor Sachin recalls:

“Her brothers were taken in by the RSS. Although her mother, elder sister and children started visiting the church. When the family found out, about 20 people came on bikes and surrounded the church and then entered. They kicked in the door and stopped the prayers. They beat up the pastor and his wife Jaya. They beat Shilpa severely and took her dupatta [scarf often used as a head-covering] as a threat that they can make things worse for her. Shilpa's brothers and father were part of the mob that came to attack them. They forcibly took her home and locked her in. They initially refused to register a FIR.”

Shilpa's brothers and father had joined the RSS after a Hindu god's statue was built in the area. The family and vigilante mob were instigated by a local SC RSS leader who was part of the mob that attacked Shilpa. The RSS leader was the one who pulled off Shilpa's dupatta. Pastor Sudhir and Jaya along with Shilpa were dragged to the police station where Pastor Sudhir and Jaya were arrested along with a few believers on false charges of forced conversion. A FIR was filed, and the believers were released on bail with the support of the Minorities officer.

However, prior to their release, the mob pressurized the compliant officer and notary to force Pastor Sudhir and Jaya to sign a legal undertaking. The undertaking they signed stated that the two of them were involved in forced conversions and that they bear responsibility for the wrongdoing. The mob and police also pressurized Shilpa to sign an undertaking as well. This undertaking stated that Shilpa believed that her life was in no danger and that if anything happened to her, it was her own fault. The police also refused to file a FIR against the attackers.

While the incident took place members of the congregation filmed the incident. However, their phones were collected by the mob after and the footage destroyed, as Jaya explained to us:

“I shot the whole video of them beating up Shilpa and my husband. They snatched my phone, deleted it and smashed it. They had also shot their own footage, but for their own purposes. They will give their lives for RSS, and we will give our lives to follow Christianity. We are not afraid, I could have beaten all those boys, but I knew my husband has to continue his practice in other places as well, his life is already at great risk.”

Intimidation and threats for seeking justice

Nine to ten families from this town come to Pastor Sachin's church, about 20 members in all. All the members have received a threat that the same thing will happen to their families as well and that they will be sent to jail for converting to Christianity. Jaya gave us her perspective:

"We believe in Christ the Lord and we gain strength from him. We will pray to whom we wish to, it is our individual choice,"

While Pastor Sachin explained that the odds are stacked against Christians:

"The strength of the RSS is much more than that of Christians, we are taking it week by week. They are trying very hard for us not to have places of worship. Most of these churches are in peoples' homes where families gather for Sunday service. Most of the houses are not owned by the families, we live in rented houses. The landlords are Hindu and will not approve this form of worship. Our assistant pastor Sudhir is from the Munda tribe, and he has been attacked several times. I live here, and I am scared. They are putting a lot of pressure on him. He is committed and will not falter in his faith. If we had some support from the Roman Catholic (RC) and Church of North India (CNI)/Church of South India (CSI) network, things would not have been so bad."

A refusal to let citizens choose their faith

We visited Shilpa, her elder and younger sister with 4 girl children, who live in a half-constructed brick house. The girls go to the nearby cashew factory and earn about Rs. 150-200/- per day. After much hesitation, Shilpa slowly opened up about her decision to become a believer in Jesus and her ensuing harrowing ordeal.

"It was not any common illness. I had a Urinary Tract infection [UTI], and my family did not care to help me when I was in a lot of pain. I went to all the temples and doctors but it didn't get better. My friend told me to go to the church. They gave me coconut oil and water. They prayed specially for me. I started feeling better. They told me it is my wish if I want to come. I started going to church every Sunday. My sisters and my mother also started coming along with me. My father cursed me, and my brother told me that the curse is Christianity. They stopped giving me food for 7 months. I was not affected. I told them I will earn and eat my own food, but I will not stop going to church. When I was going to church a group of ten boys assaulted me and told me I was brainwashed and must convert back to Hinduism. They taunted Jesus and cursed me. They locked me up again and did not give me food. They threw my sister with 4 children out of the house, as she was staying with us, after her husband started sleeping with another woman. I could not take it anymore. When I went to church, they attacked me. My father and brothers were in the mob. They tried everything, beating me, tying me up and threatening to put me in jail. I was prepared to die. They made me sign a letter forcibly that no one will take responsibility of my life after I have become Christian. With the help of the Pastor, we found this house and I have decided to live separately with my sisters. Our mother comes to visit us secretly. I still go to church every Sunday. I am not afraid of anyone. Nothing can come between me and my faith in Jesus."

It should be noted that Shilpa is from the Ghasi caste group which is considered lower than that of Dom, the dominant SC community in the area. Adults in the community are mostly drum beaters, manual scavengers, and those who bury the dead or clear animal carcasses after animals have died naturally. Yet, within this caste group, many people have been strategically co-opted by the RSS with a focus on an illusory narrative of mass conversions. Their unpaid labor is used to build statues and to shore up other Hindutva activities in the area. Even while Shilpa and her sisters are living alone along the highway with incredible courage, eking out a hand-to-mouth existence, they remain extremely vulnerable, since there is no support from any family member, except the church. Her father and brothers think she will return to the Hindutva fold and to the family home because they think she and her sisters will run short of food and means of survival. Shilpa's father has also threatened her mother that if she visits the girls, he will drag her and Shilpa to a large city in Odisha and return. This is a significant threat because many girls are forced to turn to sex work in this city [redacted] and it is a place that most girls in the area are afraid of. It is considered to be the worst option for a girl.



Case Study 5: Christians in Odisha

In 2016, Gagan, an Adivasi living in a village in Malkangiri district, fell very ill and he tried all kinds of medicine but nothing seemed to make him better. His friend told him that he should see a pastor, and that he may recover. Miraculously, he recovered and started going to the nearby church. Over the last few years, the prayer meetings and Sunday services take place in his home. A pastor visited the family every Sunday. In January 2021, the people in Gagan's village found out that he was going to church along with his whole family. Three entire villages, comprising a vigilante mob of around 200 to 250 people, came to his house and violently assaulted his whole family. His mother and youngest sister (10 years of age) were beaten mercilessly. There are no other families from their village who are Christians and therefore their family is more vulnerable to attack. His brother who lives in the same village but follows Hinduism, was also beaten up by the mob who demanded to know why he should be allowed to reside in the village if his brother is a Christian.

Seeking redress, justice denied

Gagan complained to the Sarpanch [the head of the village] and also went to the local police station to file a complaint. However, a pastor who followed up on the case recounted how the police refused to file the FIR, saying that it was a local matter and they would organize a reconciliation meeting with all the affected parties. This refusal to record atrocities committed against Christians is a common practice by the local police across Malkangiri and in other parts of Odisha when there is an issue involving violence perpetrated by Hindus. To file the case would mean to have it recorded as a communal incident. Especially if Christians are involved, communal incidents in the area and across Odisha are repeatedly being classified as domestic issues, as witchcraft or being "solved" through fake reconciliation meetings to make sure that they are not on the radar of the media or of international organizations.

A Bishop based in a large city in Odisha who has been following up the cases across the state with the state government and local authorities, confirmed this in our interview with him. The scenario that unfolded at the erstwhile reconciliation meeting between Gagan's family and their Hindu vigilante attackers was a farce, Gagan told us:

"Two tractors full of people and 50 bikes landed up at the police station. The attackers said if you stay in the village, we will kill you. The police asked why they were attacked. The mob clearly responded that they didn't harm us, but 'we don't want them in the village'. The police merely stated that if they repeat such incidents, they will be arrested. Because they were so many in number, they boldly threatened, 'we will cut you into pieces and throw you into the river'. Since Jan 2021, they have been threatening me to get me to leave the village. They have cut off our access to the ration shop and to water. I have land here, I cannot go anywhere else to work."

Intimidation, violence and harassment work to discourage Christian practice. By the time we met Gagan, he had stopped organizing the service at his house. This is because the pastor who was attending, decided to pause his visits in fear for his life due to the tense situation. Adding insult to injury, Gagan was also forced to pay a fine of Rs. 25000/- for following Christianity. One also has to pay a 100,000 Rs fine in order to marry a Christian girl or boy. Gagan's brother-in-law explained:

"They say we are Dharm Virodhis, and have created all kind of rules, that affect us directly. They argue that we are all Hindus originally, why are we becoming Christian. They suspect we get money to convert. Adivasis are not Hindus, we have our own rituals and festivals."

Gagan's brother was also told that he had to pay a fine every time he wanted to meet his Christian brother. Gagan explained:

"They are continuing to taunt us on a regular basis with death threats and by restricting our freedom to move freely in our village. In cases where there are only one or two families, the threat is high. They are likely to be dragged in ghar wapsi, so that they can ensure that villages are purely Hindu."

A senior activist who has been documenting cases of violence against Christians in this region explained: "It is also a process of building a vote base for the BJP" Many of the affected individuals concurred in their assertion that the standard questions asked by the RSS is:

"Why do you go there? What do you get from there? Do you get money for conversion? They say we are originally Hindus, why are we becoming Christians. But, as Adivasis, we don't consider ourselves Hindus. They are making it an identity issue, when it is a matter of our faith."

In response to the violence and the threat of being thrown out Gagan is resolute.

"I am not going to leave, even if they kill me. This is my land." "We need to organize ourselves and stop fighting between ourselves. We do not know what is happening in the neighboring villages. If we all come together, we can refute these illegal and discriminatory practices. The RSS is targeting the most vulnerable groups first and then coming into places like this town. They will employ different strategies for different groups."

The media make matters worse

The media does not cover such cases. The primary reason as described by the local pastors is that right-wing Hindu groups essentially run the media. To cover such stories would be to go against their narrative. *"We have tried to call the media, organize press conferences but they don't respond. They are all bought over. Everyone the police, media and the local government is hand in glove with each other. If anything, the media will go against us, we will get killed if we go to them."* Furthermore, as described by a Bishop we spoke to, the local police covers up these sorts of cases. This is because they either follow the same ideology of the oppressors or because they cannot highlight the communalism angle due to pressure from above. Within the area there is a lot of fake news that is circulated about Christians. This comes from the neighboring state, Chhattisgarh:

"There is a lot of fake news about Christians, that we are like the modern-day British. In Chhattisgarh, my brother has a day care center for teaching children. The rightwing Hindutva groups broke it down, saying that the education is bringing down Indian culture. They also attacked all the pastors in his village. Now they are unable to practice their faith or do any work in the village. The last resort is to migrate. It becomes very difficult if the person has land in the village. To access that land after he has left is almost close to impossible," described one of the local pastors.

A senior Christian leader in the area added:

"Furthermore, there is fake news being created and circulated within the town itself. "Most Adivasis don't have phones. But here in this town they do. Ten days ago, in order to instigate the Christian community, the Hindutva groups shot a video of a Christian boy slaughtering a cow and circulated it. They have issued a statement to the Church asking for the leaders to meet. The leaders stated that they can file a case against the boy, it is not something that is prescribed in the religion. They are trying to malign Christian unity. The boy is an alcoholic and not a regular to church, and they have been able to use him to produce fake videos and create disturbances in our community. They feel this town is the model place for conversion, and are trying different ways to disrupt the peace and harmony here."

Risking their lives for their faith

In this town, it is becoming more and more difficult to practice Christianity as the Hindu population in the area targets anyone known



to be of Christian faith. This is happening both in the town and in the surrounding villages. The Dalit Christians face issues with their certificates, for instance. They are being denied SC certificates because they are Christians. At the meeting we had with them, those affected described the violence as being carried out by Hindu vigilantes from their own villages, particularly by local Adivasi Hindus who have been converted to hardline Hindutva by outsiders from the RSS and other right-wing Hindu groups. The instigation of the anti-Christian violence and the strategy behind it is described as the upper caste Hindus from the RSS. As Pastor Jayant described:

“As they cannot target the Christian’s faith and make them doubt, they target the surrounding villagers who are Hindu. They tell them that if they do not maintain their Hindu practices and beliefs in the villages, they will then get bad rains, and destroyed fields in the village...They tell them that the Christians are corrupting these practices and should reconvert to Hinduism or be thrown out of the village.” “In many families only a few members may turn to Christianity, not everyone is a believer. This is what the RSS cashes in on to threaten those who have taken to a different faith: they turn their own families against them.”

The Pastor also informed us that such cases are an everyday issue. He feels that Adivasi Christians are targeted because the RSS has realized that the Koya³⁸ converts are true believers in Christianity.

“In a nearby village, one of our believers’ father passed away, his son is still in practice. They refused to allow his burial in the village. He had to cross the river and there were no boats to ferry the body across. Eventually, he had to be buried on his own land. Many believers have started accept that the village will not accept burials in the village if they are Christian.”

“In another village last year, they burnt down a church and a family was thrown out with all their belongings because they had turned to the Christian faith. They are now resettled to this town, because there is a larger population of Christians here, people feel it is safer to be here. If the son goes to meet his father, he has to pay a fine of Rs. 200.”

Many Koya Adivasis do not have a Scheduled Tribe (ST) certificate. Believing in Jesus and practicing Christianity means that many Adivasis and Dalits here have to sacrifice an enormous amount – peace of mind, physical security, land, family ties, work opportunities and congenial relations with their neighbors. Some of the local people who turn to Christianity, also aspire to become a pastor at some point, as they feel protected within the faith and also as they believe that doing so helps them to overcome alcoholism, gambling, domestic violence, leading to a general improvement in the economic circumstances of families before they are targeted by the Hindutva groups. The fear that is spreading and the atrocities that are continuing unpunished are a threat to believers’ lives and their faith, but there is also a growing resistance against the RSS. RSS’s forced conversions to Hinduism through “Ghar Wapsi”reinstalls them in the oppressive system that they previously rejected.



Reconstruction image

³⁸ Koya is the name of an indigenous group living in the states of Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Those who convert to Christianity are called Koya converts picket.

Case Study 6: Christians in Odisha

A village in Southern Odisha was home to 13 families who had converted to Christianity. A teenage Christian boy, Sukumar was chopped into pieces and crushed to death in 2020 in this village. As Sukumar took a keen interest in preaching and praying, the local pastor had entrusted the responsibility to Sukumar to manage a weekly prayer meeting. When the pastor stopped coming to the village, Sukumar became the de facto local Church leader. This was what led to him being targeted by the Hindu vigilantes. This anti-Christian murder was falsely categorized as a case involving witchcraft by local authorities. Our informants clearly delineated it as a communal incident of Christians being attacked by Hindus. It was also subsequently mis-reported by local and national media as a case involving witchcraft. This case however is one of the few cases involving violence against Christians that was picked up by the media. As one of our key informants, Edward, an activist working in the region told us:

“Media takes up these cases only when there is a death, or a genocide like Kandhamal, and that too they do a very bad job of it by misrepresenting the story.”

Background and context

The father of the murder victim Sukumar, and his family had been amongst the first to convert in the village. 12 other families followed suit. The Sunday service was held in Sukumar's home every week. The family have been subjected to consistent violence by fellow villagers due to their Christian beliefs all of which was left out when the media reported on his murder. This was spurred on by the local RSS leader and Zilla Parishad Chairman of the area. It reached a point where the local pastor who was running the services stopped attending after vigilantes came for him and abducted and tortured two other boys, following which the police instructed him to strictly stay away from the village. Sukumar took the responsibility of running the services instead. In the lead-up to the violence there was also a mysterious disease running through the village due to a contamination of the water source. Several locals had died. It was on this premise that the idea of witchcraft was falsely brought in. Three boys from the same villages were the prime suspects and were arrested subsequently. A local pastor, Pastor Jayant, who consistently follows up on cases of persecution against Christians in the area took up the case when he heard of the violence that was taking place. He shared with us the incident and took us to meet the family. He also shared the several instances of violence against the family that were not part of the media coverage and that prove that the murder of Sukumar was the continuation of the persecution of Christian families in the village.

Persecution, intimidation and violence

10 of the 13 families, a few months before the incident, were forcibly threatened to get them to convert to Hinduism. They were tied to trees, their bibles were burnt, their heads were shaved, and they were beaten by people from the nearby villages, who threatened to oust them from the village if they wish to continue practicing Christianity. Further, they were told that they would not get access to water if they continued practicing their faith and that they would not be spared if they were seen going to 'church'. The RSS has ensured that many local Hindus view Christianity as an impure, negative, foreign influence on the people who were once Hindu.

Out of fear, 11 of the 13 families converted back to Hinduism through the process of “*Ghar Wapsi*”. The other two continued to stick to their Christian faith, with the price being a denial of water supply and of access to ration shops. By making daily survival almost impossibly difficult, the local Hindu vigilantes and RSS cadres ensured that they would ultimately have to leave the village and abandon their own land which was hazardous to access. Pastor Jayant had informed the police of these incidents of discrimination and filed a complaint in writing.

Pastor Jayant recollected that a Zilla Parishad (district council) Chairman had supplied kerosene for a stealth attack when a group of Hindu vigilantes were sent after dusk one day to burn his house down. Luckily, some other families noticed from outside and contacted the pastor, who immediately called the Police. The incident of arson was stopped in the nick of time.

During the monsoon of 2019, local Hindu vigilantes came for pastor Jayant, expecting him to visit the village. However, when they could not find him, they forcibly abducted two Christian boys and tortured them, tying them up in gunny sacks and positioning them by the edge of the river, threatening to throw them in and drown them. The boys who were abducted and tortured belonged to the three families who resisted the *Ghar Wapsi*; they were Sukumar's cousins. The Hindutva vigilante mob released them the following morning, presuming that they had been pressured enough that they would also convert back to Hinduism, so that it would be easy to target the only Christian family remaining, Sukumar's family. Instead, they did not reconvert, and Pastor Jayant filed a complaint stating that the families were living under threat. The police got involved in organizing a 'peace committee meeting' between the involved parties and Pastor Jayant was told not to visit the village.



Image ©Unsplash

Around the same time, three months prior to Sukumar's murder, over a span of three months, several locals died of an illness with symptoms of cold, fever and swelling. Public health authorities tried and failed to diagnose the illness or its source. Finally, the authorities declared that the 'mysterious' deaths were caused by contaminated water. These deaths were used as a pretext to launch false charges of witchcraft and causing death against Sukumar.

A few days later, late at night around 11 pm, someone knocked on the same two families' doors and asked for Sukumar. The family inside were forcibly woken up.

Rakesh, one of the young men who ran for his life through that night and who had already endured being abducted and assaulted in the gunny sack and threatened at the edge of the river, stated:

"They had come to kill us. My wife rescued us. She opened the back door, and we ran through the night. She told them, no-one is at home, and she was alone at home. She informed Pastor Jayant immediately. We all knew that they were after Sukumar next. We returned home the next morning."

On the day of Sukumar's death, his father and his sister, were staying overnight at another believer's house as he had to take her to the nearest large hospital which is approximately 35 kilometers from their home. (To date, there is no public transportation to Sukumar's village). Sukumar was with another believer, a fourteen-year-old girl, who was staying in their house for the night. That same night they noticed a group of 12 young men, who were from the village and outside the village hanging around the house. They took Sukumar away. The Christian girl staying in Sukumar's home informed the pastor immediately. Despite this, no one managed to intervene, and Sukumar was murdered. His body was hacked with a blunt object and he was bludgeoned to death. Not very far from his house, his body parts lay scattered around, not found till much later.

Pastor Jayant mentioned that five more people died of the mysterious illness *after* Sukumar's murder, and asked sarcastically, *"Did the power of his [Sukumar's] witchcraft last even after he died?"*

This vicious attack against a teenage boy was entirely unprovoked. *"We still do not know what they did to him. We filed a missing person's complaint, since we could not find him the next day, neither his body. 12 people were listed as prime suspects, but we could not recognize anyone,"* said Pastor Jayant, who has been the one following the case, and who registered the FIR. Because this case gained some media attention, they took the investigation process seriously. After the police threatened to shoot him in an "encounter killing" (a staged killing where police claim to have fired on terrorists or Naxals), one of the prime suspects confessed that Sukumar had been murdered. He revealed who had committed the murder and pointed our researchers to the site of murder.

"4 were arrested in the case, and 2 are already out on bail. It's not even been a year since the incident took place. The idea was to finish all the Christian families, so that no more people follow Christianity on their land. The fake news that spread across all media channels that

Sukumar did witchcraft to the people who have been dying, ensured that the case was forgotten without anyone going deeper into the details. The media showed up only when the body was recovered, and all the local channels accused Sukumar of witchcraft.”

Perversion of justice

The night Sukumar's body was found, and the murder charge was filed our key informant, Edward, was at the station to follow up on the case. Edward said that the Inspector in Charge (IIC) clearly stated Sukumar was killed because he was a Christian and that this was a communal incident. The next day when the media got involved however, the IIC released a statement that Sukumar was killed because the villagers believed he was practicing witchcraft. A Bishop from a major city in Odisha followed up on the case writing to the local Deputy General of Police (DGP) and state authorities, even writing to the Chief Minister's Office. The authorities all denied that the incident was communal and kept stating that it was “just to do with witchcraft”. These denials and disinformation continued to circulate even after the Bishop laid out a clear chain of evidence about the continued persecution of the family for their Christian faith.

We found that even progressive publications ended up participating in this misinformation, by doing nothing to challenge misrepresentations of the facts around the incident. To repeat the story as the killing of an individual accused of ‘witchcraft’ is utterly disingenuous and further spreads fear and paranoia among people. The local TV channels sensationalized the incident and did nothing to investigate the back story of longstanding harassment and discrimination against Sukumar, his family and the other Christian families in the area. Many places in the area still don't have a mobile phone signal, and internet connectivity came about only two years ago.

Beyond Sukumar's murder: Christians living in fear

Pastor Jayant continues to get calls from many of the Christian believers, who are afraid to practice their religious faith because of this horrific incident. It is a severe threat on already existing believers and is discouraging anyone to step out of their own religion. Pastor Jayant explained:

“I remember driving alone with my wife in an auto with a coffin on top of it. Another Pastor was also following us on his bike. My wife was scared and crying the whole way through. What if they thought we are transporting Sukumar's body in the coffin. We could easily be attacked. But Sukumar's spirit gives me strength to fight against persecution in this area. People make fun of me saying I am in the Police station every second day, when do I get time to practice my faith. Sukumar's death shook me and has given me conviction that this has to be stopped. I know my life is under threat but I am not afraid of death. Sukumar was such a dedicated believer.”

Meanwhile, Edward expanded on the parties involved in the anti-Christian indoctrination:

“There is no support from the SP or MP, they are all hand in glove with the RSS. They are all dead against outsiders entering the village. There is no police protection, no rehabilitation facilities when people are thrown out of their villages. It is brutal, the attack against Christians. Kandhamal in many ways has still not ended. The RSS has been saying the same things way too loud and way too many times. Their infiltration and indoctrination process began in the 80s. They knew that there is a 30 % ST population fertile for indoctrination against Christian missionaries.”

We conclude with Pastor Jayant's sorrowful recitation:

“We have cases like this every day. No FIRs were or are filed, and there are also false charges filed against Christian believers who report such incidents. Another believer was picked up in November 2020 and beaten brutally by a mob of 15 people. Because his wife converted too, they took the girl back without their consent. His family had to pay a fine of Rs. 100,000 for following Christianity. Villagers accused him that she was a minor and he forcibly converted her. Her education certificate shows that she is 19 years, so does her Aadhar card. There was pressure to arrest him under these false charges. They filed a rape case against him since there was no proof of marriage. He was in judicial custody for nearly a month. Finally, because we were able to produce evidence of his wife's pregnancy card, which clearly mentioned that he was her husband, he is now out on bail. The girl was asked to forcibly abort the child. There was a love marriage. Imagine the damage this has caused to these young people. Early in March 2021, a church close to [redacted] was smashed up, they even beat up the widow who was a caretaker there. A teacher was suspended in a nearby village in a fake case stating that he is forcibly converting people to Christianity. Basically, no Christian believer can get a government job or hold any position of power in this area. Their housing will never have roads, if you are Christian, you will not have access to food or water, eventually you will be asked to leave your village. How can anyone feel free to practice their religion here?”

Case Study 7: Muslims in Madhya Pradesh

The population of this village in Madhya Pradesh is 4,000 with a majority being Muslim. The village has no history of Hindu-Muslim clashes before. Violence broke out in late December 2020 when a far-right Hindutva youth group affiliated with the BJP organized an aggressive procession and rally to collect money for the Ram temple to be built in Ayodhya. Members of the mob started using abusive language in front of some houses. Eventually some of the Muslims subjected to this intimidation and abuse also responded in abusive language, which triggered violence. Some of the far-right Hindutva rally participants hopped on top of the police car, climbed onto the local mosque's minaret, and tried to smash it with a sword.

The village where the incident occurred is a medium sized village where most people do farming, have their own land ranging between 1 Bigha to 20-30 Bigha . All the Muslims in the village are OBC (belonging to the Other Backward Caste). They adopt the surname of Nayta Patel, and their ancestors had come from Gujarat. All the houses are built of bricks and most households have bikes, tractors, a JCB and some land. People are either farmers or work as daily wage workers in neighboring cities. There are a couple of mosques in the village and a Maulana who hails from Bihar, who lives in the village.

The village has 500 houses, and the population is mostly Muslim with only 3-4 houses of Dalits (who the Muslims call Harijans). The total population of the village is 4000. The village is surrounded by other villages with a majority Hindu population. Almost every household here has their own land (small to medium land holding). Airtel had no cellular coverage in the area, the Vodafone signal is weak, and the village residents said that Jio works best in their area. The village is approximately 120 kilometers from one of the larger cities in MP and as we turned off the highway, the roads deteriorated. There were very small shops selling clothes, vegetables, some tractor repair shops, mobile repair shops and so on. The roads were quite narrow, the houses small and densely packed. This village on the other hand is assuredly rural, there is just one mud road stretching out with fields on one side, and houses on the other.

Intimidation by Hindutva mobs, provocation and violence

Our research team met our local contact Junaid who immediately started talking about the incident:

"This is the chauraha (crossroads) where the rally was passing through, there were high chances of violence happening here, but nothing happened. They moved on and violence occurred a little ahead. Let's go, I will show you the place where it happened".

We followed him. He showed us the houses where the stone pelting took place from both ends. We stopped in front of an Idgah, he showed the minaret which the mob tried to break. Showing us his phone, he explained:

"A police car was parked right here, they hopped on the roof of the police car and climbed the minaret and tried to break it with a sword. There are videos of it. You can see".

By this time, other people gathered around and started telling us how they were all running inside the gullies and the police was running after them. How the mob gathered on the main road of the village. Then we went to the house, which the mob set on fire and a member of the family who was shot at. As we came in, a group of 7-6 men were sitting on a charpoy out in the sun. They were members of the family and few young men from the neighboring houses.

They started telling us what happened on the day of the incident, in the village. One day in late December 2020 the house was attacked in the evening around 4.30 pm. Three brothers live in this house with their families. A mob came in with swords and guns. The group of men said that this was the first rally in their village taken out to collect the money for the Ram temple to be built in Ayodhya. They have never heard of Hindu-Muslim clashes in their village before.

One of our key informants said,

"We used to wonder how riots take place, now we have seen it happen to us. We never thought we would see it for ourselves."

Social media and Hindutva planning

They knew about the rally in advance. A few days before the rally there were messages circulating on WhatsApp, Instagram, and other apps, that a rally would be held and travel through five villages to collect funds for the temple. They showed us the posters that they received informing about the rally. They said their Hindu friends had also put the poster as their WhatsApp status, so they knew about the rally in advance. The rally came to the village at 11 AM. There was a DJ in the rally and there was sloganeering. The police were present in the village since 8.30 in the morning. There were about 250 men on bikes in the rally in the morning and they knew most of them as they were people from neighboring villages. Some of them were their Hindu friends. But at 4pm when the house was attacked, more people were called from outside, and they did not recognize any of them. They were shouting slogans like- *jai siya ram [Hail Lord Ram]*.

Setting the context, one of the men asked us,

“Have you ever seen Muslims attacking a Hindu holy place? it is always a Muslim holy place that gets destroyed. There are no Hindus in our village, but we have a temple. The 4-5 ‘Harijan’ families in the village are not even allowed inside that temple because of discriminatory practices. It is Hindus from the neighboring village who come to worship here. Even the priest comes from outside. Despite all that happened, we did not even touch the temple. We could have done something if we wanted to. Even after the riots the priest has been coming every day to the village, we have not said anything.”

Talking about the incident they recounted:

“The rally came to the village at 11am. Everyone was anticipating trouble at the chauraha (main crossroads) of the village, but nothing happened there. They kept sloganeering, played the DJ music, and moved ahead. But they came with the intent to create trouble; then they started using abusive language and shouting abusive words in front of some houses. Then people from our end also responded and started abusing them. This triggered violence. Some of their people hopped on top of the police car parked near the Idgah and climbed onto the minaret and tried to break it with a sword.”

The police claim that a bullet has been fired from the Muslim side, but interestingly, the police themselves are the only witnesses to it, there are no other witnesses. A policeman was also overheard saying “Aadhar card itna fast nahi banta jitni fast muslim marte hain.” (Muslims are dying faster than Aadhaar cards can be made). This was reported to us by several informants.

Discrimination and harassment by Hindutva politicians and administrators

After the incident, 28 men from the village were detained, 24 were released later but 4 are still in custody, they have Section 307 of the IPC (Attempt to murder) filed against them. People who have suffered injuries and actual loss have not filed any cases.

“We are only trying to get our four brothers out of jail but getting bail seems difficult.”

They showed us a video where the police were arresting four random boys who had been picked up on the allegation that they had guns and had fired at the men who attended the rally. It is these four men who are still in custody and accused of attempt to murder. It came up during the discussion that on the day of the incident, around 3.30-4pm, when the situation was already tense in the village, the ex-BJP MLA gave a statement to the media [including local news channels, and many others] that the village will be demolished in the next two days. [We were able to access this video].

In the video he says that ‘the Muslims needlessly attacked harmless Hindus who were out to collect donations for the Ram temple in Ayodhya, like rallies in many other parts of the country. If the police did not act immediately against the Muslims, then the whole of Hindu society there would take matters in their own hands’.

Basically, it was an open threat of mob vigilante violence straight from an MLA of the ruling party announced in the media. They told us that this village did not vote for BJP in the last election; not a single vote went to that side. This time they voted for Congress and have a Congress MLA now. But he has not come to the village even once after the incident; they feel he is scared that he will be perceived as a Muslim supporter if he is seen coming to the village. Sarpanch of the village is from the SC community but according to the men in the group he is also a BJP supporter. They told us that the Sarpanch has not even made a *panchnama* till date (an official document to record the damage done to compensate those affected by the demolition and looting). One of the men also mentioned that during the violence, one of the leaders of the Karni Sena at the site of the incident took over the police mic to make statements threatening Muslims. The men felt that Madhya Pradesh was not like this before. They feel that the current Chief Minister [Shiv Raj Singh Chauhan] has won by money and hence he has changed.

The day after this incident, 18 houses were demolished in the village by JCB machine. The reason given was- ‘illegal’ constructions are being demolished for road widening in the village. The sub-divisional magistrate (SDM), District Collector (DC) and Patwari (village administrative officer) came along with the JCB for demolition, but they did not have any notice or paper to support the order

for demolition. None of the people were notified that their houses would be demolished for road widening. The new road after the demolition was constructed in eight days after demolition, the fastest work ever done by the administration in the village.

The threat of a pogrom: anti-Muslim violence

Going back to the incident, our informants recounted how, at 4pm when the mob returned with more men, there were about 6000 Hindutva men in the village then, they targeted one house and set fire to a part of the building, along with two motorbikes and a tractor. These were still lying in the outdoor area of the house. Doors had marks of swords and had clearly been broken. A toddler got stuck inside the room that was set on fire however, he was saved later. The house that was burnt suffered a loss of 20 lakh rupees, jewelry and cash was also looted from the house. The family had called the fire brigade when the room was set on fire, but the mob did not let the fire brigade enter the village. They mentioned that in the morning, the same family was giving water to the people in the rally and in the evening those very people attacked the house. All the 6000 men present in the village at that time had some arms with them, guns or swords. They ran after people in the fields and destroyed crops. The police were present throughout the incident, for the whole day. The mob left the village by 5.30-6pm. Apparently, the sound of firecrackers was heard later in the evening from neighboring villages, which mostly consist of Hindus. Many young men who were part of the mob were also from neighboring villages. The local Muslims drew their own conclusions from these apparent celebrations. Many young Hindus have joined RSS in the last 5-6 years:

"Many of the boys who came in the morning rally are actually our friends, we know them. Now when we ask them why you did all this, they just say- 'we didn't do it, people came from outside to do all this'. But they didn't stop them from doing this to us, they were just watching us getting beaten up, running for our lives. Those we considered friends and decent people since childhood; I saw a sword in their hands. Of course, all this has affected our friendship."

Since the incident a sense of fear and uncertainty has settled over the Muslim villagers:

"After two months it has gone cold. The constitution is with us, but the people who have to work with the Constitution, they are not with us. We feel scared after the riots. The administration stopped the villagers from reacting, but they didn't stop the people who were trying to kill us. The 500 houses in this village are built on Panchayat land, so we don't have any papers to claim the compensation for demolition. We are scared that if they take the matter further, they would be asked to leave this land and their houses where they have been living for generations."

Over the years, many people from this village have purchased land in the neighboring village which mostly has a Hindu population and this has become a point of contention. *"They cannot see a Muslim prosper"*.

After the incident many videos and photos are being circulated for example, a song made with the images of the houses being demolished. Lyrics are- *hum unko Gali we nikle, ajab ittefaq tha. Unhone int kya fenki, subah tak unka ghar saaf tha.*[We passed through their streets, it was quite a coincidence; when they threw the bricks, by morning their homes were demolished]. Another photo was circulated of a local Hindu leader cleaning his gun. The group said these are being circulated to create fear.

Around 7pm on the day of the violence, the police started picking up Muslim youth from houses saying, 'you were part of the violence'. Because of this many Muslim youth ran away from the village. One of the targeted youth agreed to talk to us:

"next day, they demolished my house of 8 rooms. I ran away to [redacted], as I was scared and angry. They were also picking up boys randomly from houses. I was so angry about what had happened...They demolished my house, threw away all the things of the house along with debris in the gutter nearby. My father did not cry when my grandfather died but he cried when they broke our house, I could not watch it.... One has to remain silent but as they say, sab yaad rakha jayega (Everything will be remembered)."

"I used to have my own YouTube channel, I used to make music. But after the incident I deleted the channel. Nothing comes out of making music. Also, you don't know what they will do with my music; they might use it against me. I drive a tractor; I get scared to go to their area, mujhe fansa denge (they will implicate me in something). I don't want to make my children doctors or engineers; I will make them an advocate."

Another victim explained his understanding of the rationale for the local persecution of Muslim citizens,

"if one wants to become popular in India- harm Muslims. It is a shortcut to popularity these days. There was one local channel whose crew was present through the incident, and they were making videos. But when we called an ambulance at that time because of bullet and sword injuries, the channel reported saying that the ambulance has come to the village, as someone is sick. It said that nobody got hurt from the Muslim side in the riot. Many policemen didn't have badges on their uniform".

Only the younger men in the area seemed to have digital media literacy, were active on social media channels such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. The elders either had basic phones or even if they had smartphones, they did not know how to use the features and/or had apps. Most of the elderly men used the phones to make and receive calls. They all had various videos of not only the incident that happened in their village, but also had received videos of violence against Muslims in other places in Madhya Pradesh. Obviously, word and images of violence were being shared widely amongst the Muslim community as a marker of fear, just as these very images are probably being shared by Hindus in the name of pride or for mobilizing mobs elsewhere. Most of the Muslims had watched and re-watched footage of that day, as well as video clips from another incidents in Madhya Pradesh, including one incident where vigilantes can be seen climbing on top of structures, removing a green flag and replacing it with a saffron flag with a large mob below cheering on the vigilantes. Most notably, the narrative from the Hindu side seems to be that Muslims are throwing stones and disrupting a peaceful rally for temple donations. The media seems to have converted this incident into one of wounded Hindu pride or wounded Hindu sentiments and something that must be dealt with as severely as possible.

Since the lockdown began, there has been further misinformation that Muslims will spread COVID, some people told us that when they went to the local market with their produce, they found few or no buyers. The whole community seemed extremely dejected and overwhelmed with the strength of anti-Muslim sentiment manifesting itself everywhere around them in various ways both directly and through other ways such as economic boycott, as well as damage to property and any material gains that Muslims had made.

Towards the end of the research focus group, they asked what would happen with all this research and all the questions that were being asked of them.

“Many people have come, many have taken photos and videos, have spoken to us and they have gone back. Nothing has happened. What will you do with this research?”

We told them that we hoped it could contribute to finding a just solution to their predicament.



Case Study 8: Muslims in Madhya Pradesh

On 25th December 2020, in a small city in Madhya Pradesh with a substantial Muslim population, hundreds of Hindu male cadres affiliated to the BJP arrived with motorbikes for a Hindutva demonstration and rally. Wielding saffron flags and thick sticks, they marched through a temple town in the Hindi heartland. The rally was organized to collect money for the Ram temple to be built in Ayodhya. The Hindutva rally passed by a Muslim dominated neighborhood a few times, with members of the mob continually shouting vile abuse at the Muslims, and finally throwing stones at their houses. Eventually, a few infuriated Muslim locals also shouted slogans in response and limited stone throwing ensued from a few of the houses. By evening, Hindu and Muslim religious leaders reached the spot and asked the police to control the situation. One video in particular went viral where a Muslim woman was seen throwing a few stones towards the rally. As the video itself clearly shows, these stones did not hit anyone. Yet, it was this video that would become the basis on which the BJP would construct a false narrative of their “peaceful rally being attacked.”

Our research team arrived at a main road near an old temple and met with Abdul, a lawyer. Abdul took us to a local neighborhood health clinic run by Javed. Along with him was Zeeshan, a young social activist who has been helping and supporting the Muslim community in this city. They provided evidence which suggests that the city is a historical powerbase for the far right Hindutva pressure group, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Even though Nagpur is known to be the center for the RSS, this city has been important in terms of hosting camps, discussions, and nurturing several national leaders who have been important for Hindutva. Javed who runs the clinic was actively involved in the protests against the highly discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) that the BJP Government pushed in late 2018 and which was followed by massive protests in large parts of the country, most of them led by Muslims. Thousands of people attended these protests which only came to an end with the sudden national lockdown announced by the government in late March 2020.

Alongside these three people, our key informants were also several local Muslim politicians who were active at the ward level, and a Hindu lawyer who has been supporting this group with fighting the cases in court. Javed himself runs a local charitable organization that has been distributing food to people of all faiths during the lockdown. He explained:

“We were getting so sickened of seeing the number of people who died during COVID last year. Every night, there would be poor Muslims their bodies had to be disposed and there was no one to do it. We were feeding hundreds of people every day; we got no help from the government or administration. If we had not managed to raise those funds and feed people, many more would have died of hunger.”

Efforts to maintain a secular community undermined by disinformation

When asked if the clinic and food distribution was mostly for Muslims, our informants were emphatic that relief was distributed on a secular basis and many Hindus also gratefully accepted relief. He however also mentioned that in spite of the good work that they had done throughout the lockdown, lies were constantly circulated about Muslims through WhatsApp Groups, for instance alleging that they were intentionally spreading Covid-19 to Hindus, and that it was dangerous to buy anything from Muslims or eat anything cooked by Muslims. They also referred to the news about the Nizamuddin Markaz and the Tablighi Jamat, especially the social media messages claiming that Jamat's congregation at the Markaz is responsible for spreading Covid-19 throughout India. Zeeshan pointed out that even though the restrictions were announced much later than the Tablighi Jamat, the media pinpointed blame only on the Muslims. There were several Hindu festivities and gatherings where no social distance was maintained but no one ever raised any questions about these occasions even though by then the danger of COVID was well known.

All our key informants affirmed that many Muslims have been integrated into the local economy, especially the temple economy. Some of them make agarbattis (incense sticks), which the devotees take inside for the worship, others prepare food, and some make lamps and so on. Recently, these things have come under pressure. Again, a local politician's video has gone viral where the politician is connecting every Muslim activity to some kind of 'jihad.' For example, if there is a shop run by Muslims selling Hindu devotional music, then it would be 'music jihad.' The group showing us around found it amusing but also, they were worried about the scale and extent of economic boycott and hostility their entire community was facing because of such videos and the popularity of these videos.

Spectacular Hindu processions and rallies as a provocation against minorities

Our key informants told us that in late December 2020, hundreds of young BJP affiliated men, belonging to Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (BJYM, the youth wing of the BJP) came out on the street with motorbikes and walked aggressively with flags and huge

sticks through the city. They passed repeatedly through the street near a temple, where a Muslim dominated slum is located. They passed a few times and continually shouted abuse at the Muslims, and finally also started throwing stones at the houses and at local shops and businesses owned by Muslims. Finally, unable to bear the provocation and being intimidated, a few Muslim young men also started shouting slogans, and there was limited stone throwing from a few of the houses in the slum. Both sides were shooting the incident on their mobile phones. Very quickly things started heating up after a few stone pelting incidents and a few vehicles were damaged although it is not clear whose stone throwing damaged whose vehicles. Hindu and Muslim religious leaders reached the spot by evening and asked the police to bring the situation under control.

Hindutva misuse of video evidence as dis- and misinformation

One video in particular went viral where a Muslim woman from the slum was seen throwing a few stones. In fact, as the video clearly demonstrates, those few stones she threw did not hit anyone, and she could only reach an auto rickshaw parked outside her house. A woman standing close by [to the stone-throwing woman] could be heard laughing about how the stones were completely ineffective. It was this video that would become the basis on which the BJP would construct a false narrative of being attacked:

“Qaziji first said that it would be fair for the police to arrest a few young men from the Hindus as well as the Muslims. Keep them in the police station for one or two days until the situation calms down and let them off after warning. He then also mentioned that if the police do not control the situation in 15 minutes, then the violence could escalate and then nobody could control the violence. He [the Qazi] meant that action was urgently needed as the violence was at tipping point, and that the young men would not listen to any plea for calm after that point. Instead after the Qazi’s statement, some of the Hindutva people cleverly edited his statement and made it look as if the Qazi was making a threat – as if he was saying that in 15 minutes the Muslims would show the Hindus their place or something along those lines. This fake news then spread like wildfire.”

Another key informant added:

“The Home Minister of MP, no less, made a statement that very evening that ‘stones would be taken away from the very houses from where stones were thrown’. He was referring to that one video which went viral where a woman could be seen throwing stones. It was also an open threat that their houses would be demolished, and indeed houses were demolished the very next day. So the whole thing seems to have been planned and the whole system is with the [Hindutva mobs] – the police, the media, the administration and the politicians”.

Javed also referred to a video by a well-known Hindu religious leader,¹ who gave an inciting speech, which is still doing the rounds on social media. In that speech, the leader referred to the ‘15 minute’ aspect, [clearly referring to the edited version of the Qazi’s statement] and then makes a threat that if the issue is not dealt with sternly by the authorities, they will make sure that they will take the matters into



their own hands in such a way that there will not be enough graveyards left in MP to bury the Muslims.

The group of key informants took our research team to the slum area, near a temple. Our visit fell almost exactly two months after the violent incident took place. Some of the houses were still half-demolished and lay in ruins. They said that the demolition of houses in the slum must be read in the context of the Hindutva project in the cit. Javed recounted that:

"The temple has always been a prominent marker and place of historical significance for the BJP. However, more recently, right next to this temple, the state government has also built a Bharat Mata Mandir (Mother India temple). This temple began in [redacted] and was completed in [redacted], and according to the group hosting us, the state government plans to spend millions more on the temple in the coming months and years. Basically, the money will be used to expand the campus of this temple, setting up huge residential spaces for devotees, but also for RSS camps and deliberation sessions. The existing campus already has hundreds of CCTV cameras. All around the temple, construction is ongoing with pillars coming up. The expansion of this temple means that much of the informal economy [guest houses, eateries etc.] serving the temple, as well as the residents of the will all be evicted. Initially the state government had said that all those living within a 500-meter radius of the temples would have to leave due to the temple expansion and they would get some compensation. However, they soon changed the rules to 60-70 meters radius around the temple, and now Muslim residents are the most affected since they would all have to leave soon. The government has promise them land about 15 kilometers away from the city. They are all daily wage laborers; their work is in the city, how will they manage to commute 15 kilometers every day? After the video of the BJP politician [mentioned above] went viral, the very next day JCB machines came and started demolishing the very same house from where the woman had thrown the stones. As soon as the demolition was about to start, some calls were made and those doing the demolition realized that the house was actually owned by a Hindu. Since the cameras were already present, the JCB operators and the administrators present were asked [by unknown higher authorities] to demolish a Muslim-owned house next door, even though there was absolutely no evidence that this household had anything to do with the violence."

Even after the demolition and complete symbolic domination over the Muslims, the police have slapped various charges against the Muslims. None of the Hindus have been booked even though there seems to be detailed video evidence of stone throwing and damage to property by the BJYM vigilantes. The lawyer, Abdul, who was one of our key informants, explained that the charges have been completely fabricated, exaggerated and will not stand a chance in court, but that the process itself will take a long time and tie up the innocent defendants in a lengthy and emotional legal battle.

"Four people have been booked with Rasuka for throwing stones! Section 307 (attempt to murder) has been filed against the woman who allegedly threw stones. The government doctor has examined some injuries in people who attended that rally and has concluded that there was no threat to life. There is clear video evidence that the woman throwing stones was someone else. There is no video evidence that the woman booked under section 307 has thrown any stones. I don't know how the police will justify that this woman who never threw a single stone, can be booked on attempt to murder."

Persistent disinformation and harassment engendering of fear

Apart from the shock of the violence, there seems to be a persistent sense of fear, and harassment of Muslims on a continual basis. For example, our key informants all explained that they had spoken to the Muslim residents that the demolition was illegal and that the activists would help them get compensation or at the very least fight their cases in court and get them justice. However, these informants also mentioned that the BJP/RSS men would just turn up at the Muslim slum area randomly, often with cameras and paper and pens in hand, with official looking identification badges around their necks. They would just start asking questions about how many people are living in the houses, and what they are doing and so on. Given that most of the residents are not literate they would get intimidated. During these visits, these pseudo 'officials' would also speak to these residents and would try to divide them against each other. They ask them not to get involved in court matters since it will delay things by many years and in the end if the case is lost, they would get nothing. In the end, by a mixture of threats and duplicitous persuasion, the residents have all more or less resigned to moving out of their houses.

The local health clinic now functions as a General Physician Practice and an informal community center. Javed wants to keep it running long term, perhaps even permanently. We met doctors who come on daily visits to treat patients. Young Muslim women are volunteering with medicine distribution and some food distribution. During our visit, we also saw a few Hindu families and individuals who came to visit although the majority of patients were Muslim.

When we asked them about the media, our key informants said that although the media was present, their side of the story was completely missing from the media narrative. The television channels and the newspapers had all reported in a way that gave a false impression – making out that Muslims attacked innocent Hindus who were peacefully asking for temple donations. Although we knew of some limited coverage about the incident, they seemed to hold the opinion that by and large, when it comes to the Hindi language media where it mattered the most in terms of shaping the public sphere and narrative, they had been totally betrayed by the media.

Appendix 1-3



Appendix 1

Image refers to background of anti-Christian persecution in Case Study 1. The image is sourced from the website The News Minute.com, available at: <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/bengaluru-christian-community-alleges-local-officials-removed-jesus-statue-without-cause>. Copyright information about this image is unknown.



Appendix 2

Hindu vigilantes in Karnataka disrupt Christian prayer meetings accusing pastors of conversion, share the video on social media, further fueling discriminatory and inciting speech in the comments section.



Appendix 3

Social media user in Jharkhand shares false information alleging conversion against Christians leading to other users to spread rumors and incite violence in the comments.

Appendix 4-6



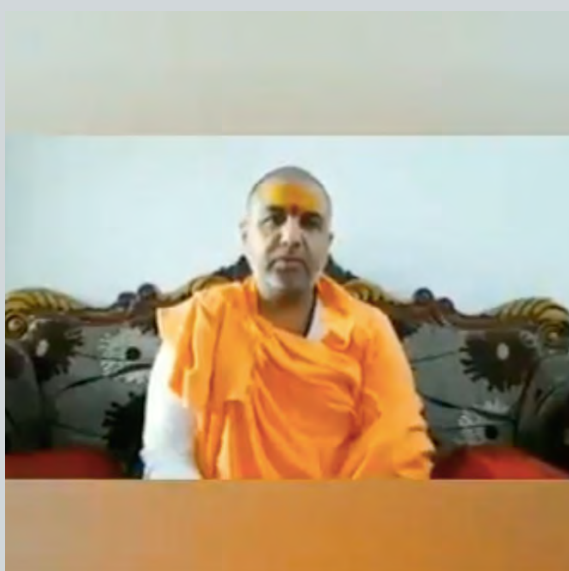
Appendix 4

Image of a poster shared on social media announcing that a rally will be conducted to raise funds for Ram temple in Ayodhya.



Appendix 5

A prominent BJP politician appearing on local TV news channel threatening violence against Muslims.



Appendix 6

A well-known rightwing Hindu religious leader threatening violence against Muslims one day after incidents of communal unrest. This video was further circulated on social media.

Appendix 7

Topic guide for interviews

Section 1 - Basic demographic information, local context (warm up questions)

Tell me a little bit about yourself (age, occupation, religious affiliation, etc.)

What about your family?

Tell me a little bit about the neighborhood and its history.

Section 2 - Media habits and media ecosystem

What kind of media do you access on a daily basis? Could you describe what you did yesterday for example from the time you woke up to when you went to sleep?

What are the other groups and forums that you are part of?
(WhatsApp groups, Facebook groups, local offline sharing of media content through SD cards etc.)

Can you think of or recall any 'fake news' that has come to you or you have heard about or seen that has been circulating in this place?

Section 3 - Religion-based conflict/discrimination and inciting speech

Do you know of conflict/violence in this place? What do you think were the causes?
(any small or major incidents the subject can recall from memory)

Could you tell us the story of what happened to you at that time? Please feel free to give us as many details as you wish.

Do you know of or can you recall any recent online and/or offline speeches or videos made by people that is asking for some people or specifically that person's followers to engage in some kind of action and/or violent behavior?

Section 4 - Closing questions

How has life changed for you after the violence and/or discrimination you have told us about?

How has your media consumption or media habits changed after the violence and/or discrimination you have described to us?

According to you, what could be done to improve the situation of religious minorities in your area?

Is there anything else you wish to share with us or anything else you feel is important for us to write about?



opendoors.org | advocacy@od.org

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