

POLICY BRIEF



India

Widespread violence and discrimination against minority religions

India is the world's most populous country and one of the fastest growing economies. According to the Indian Constitution, India is a secular state; Article 25 of the Constitution recognizes that all persons are "entitled to freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practice and propagate religion".¹ The Constitution also recognizes the right of minorities to preserve their culture and religion, providing non-discrimination clauses in Articles 29 and 30.²

Since the 1990s, Hindutva extremists – groups that promote the ideology of Hindu nationalism, which seeks to define India primarily as a Hindu nation – have gained momentum. They propagate the narrative that

true Indians belong to an Indic faith, that Muslims and Christians are foreigners, and advocate for India to become a Hindu theocracy. Though religion-based violence has existed for years, evidence suggests Hindutva extremists have created an environment of increasing hostility toward minority religious groups – primarily Christians and Muslims – in recent years. The Union Government led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has tightened its grip on civil society and made changes to the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act, 2020 (FCRA), introducing stricter regulations on foreign funding, which particularly affects religious and civil society organizations.³

¹ "The Constitution of India", Art. 25. Available at: indiankanoon.org/doc/237570

² "We're Indians too: An analysis of escalating human rights violations against religious minority communities in India", *Open Doors*, January 2019, pp. 8.

³ "India: Country Dossier", World Watch Research, January 2026, pp. 6. Available at: opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/country-dossiers

The escalating level of violence and discrimination

In recent years, violence and discrimination against religious minorities in India have escalated. Reports indicate mob violence, social ostracism, property destruction, inciting speech, disruption of peaceful religious activities, and false accusations of “conversion.”⁴ Mob attacks against Christians have resulted in severe injuries, deaths, and destruction of property. Despite the growing number of incidents, authorities have taken limited action, contributing to a climate of impunity and fear among religious minorities. Social boycott and expulsion of Christians from villages have also increased. In some areas, Hindutva extremist groups have pressured communities to socially isolate

Christians by restricting access to shared resources such as water wells and discouraging employment.⁵ There has been a rise in attacks on places of worship. Vigilante groups linked to Hindutva extremism have assaulted worshippers in churches and mosques and disrupted religious ceremonies, at times reportedly with the support or complicity of police and members of BJP.⁶ Violent mobs have also attacked Christian weddings⁷ and funerals.⁸ Inciting speech has increased significantly, with leaders of Hindutva extremist groups urging followers to attack religious minorities and using rhetoric that amounts to calls for violence and the annihilation of entire people groups.⁹ Several members of the BJP, including some holding government portfolios, have made public statements that incite communal hostility against minorities.¹⁰



Pastor Chandrakumar's (name changed) church was stormed by a mob of Hindu extremists. He was beaten and falsely imprisoned for weeks before finally being released.

Freedom of religion laws

Often called anti-conversion laws, these laws currently exist in thirteen states: Odisha, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan, Haryana, Maharashtra, and Arunachal Pradesh. Two of these are not yet in active operation: Maharashtra's Bill was awaiting the Governor's assent as of April 2026, and Arunachal Pradesh's 1978 Act remains unenforced pending notification of the rules. The alleged purpose of the laws is to prohibit conversions by force, fraud or inducement. However, their vague provisions, and frequent misuse by civilians and law enforcement to restrict the religious freedom of individuals from minority religions are contributing to the erosion of the right to freedom of religion or belief.¹¹ Law enforcement officers often misinterpret anti-conversion laws and provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), India's penal code, especially sections 196 and 299, leading to arrests of non-Hindu faith adherents for conducting constitutionally protected religious ceremonies. Prayer meetings and religious ceremonies of non-Hindus are often disrupted on allegations of conversion, with faith leaders arrested under provisions of the BNS, even in states without anti-conversion laws.¹² Furthermore, these laws are

⁴ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), 2026 Annual Report, pp. 29. Available at: uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2026-03/USCIRF_2026_AR_3326_NEW.pdf

⁵ hindutvawatch.org/barred-from-using-pond-collecting-wood-4-families-boycotted-in-jharkhand-village-for-converting-to-christianity-police-step-in-indian-express

⁶ “USCIRF 2026 Annual Report”, *Ibid.*, pp. 29.

⁷ csw.org.uk/2025/06/23/press/6550/article

⁸ abc.net.au/news/2025-02-16/christian-denied-burial-attacks-on-religious-minorities-india

⁹ genocidewatch.com/single-post/hindu-extremists-threaten-genocide-against-christians

¹⁰ reuters.com/world/india/anti-minority-hate-speech-india-rose-by-13-2025-us-research-group-says-2026-01-13

¹¹ These laws raise concerns due to prior notification requirements, vague inducement provisions, reversed burden of proof, and reconversion exemptions. For eg., section 2 (c) of the Rajasthan state's anti-conversion law expressly exempts “reconversion” to Hinduism. See: prsindia.org/files/bills_acts/acts_states/rajasthan/2025/Act21of2025RJ.pdf

¹² timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/kerala-pastor-among-8-held-in-maharashtra-over-religious-conversion-bid-cm-vijayan-slams-move/articleshow/126274642.cms

often applied discriminatorily against minorities while rarely enforced against conversions to Hinduism. Conversions carried out by Hindutva groups through force, fraud, or inducement often go unaddressed, either due to unequal enforcement or because conversion to Hinduism is excluded from the scope of many anti-conversion laws.¹³



Violations against Christian Dalits

Article 17 of the Constitution of India abolishes untouchability and caste-based discrimination, while Article 15 prohibits discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth.¹⁴ Although caste discrimination is prohibited, caste remains a reality in society. The state recognizes caste categories to implement affirmative action through a quota-based reservation system for Scheduled Castes (formerly known as “untouchable” caste, also known as Dalits), established by a Presidential Order in 1950.¹⁵ Approximately 15% of seats in educational institutions and government jobs are reserved for Scheduled Castes. However, Scheduled Caste status is limited to Hindus, Sikhs, and Buddhists, excluding Dalits who belong to Christianity or Islam and those who convert to these religions. Although several government commissions have recommended removing religious restrictions from the reservation system, these recommendations have not been implemented.¹⁶ In 2019, India introduced a 10% reservation for economically weaker sections regardless of caste.¹⁷ However, this measure does not address the exclusion of Christian and Muslim Dalits, who continue to face compounded discrimination based on both caste and religion, including limitations in political representation.¹⁸

Pastor Sampath (name changed) leads a small church of around fifteen tribal families in Telangana. Last year, local villagers, influenced by Hindutva extremists, destroyed the church building. Since then, believers have struggled to find work as neighbors have refused to hire them, and household incomes have fallen. Open Doors is supporting the congregation through presence ministry and grocery kits.

Violations against minority faith adherents from tribal areas

The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act 1996 (PESA) grants significant powers of self-governance to village assemblies known as Gram Sabhas in India’s “Scheduled Areas,” protected tribal regions predominantly inhabited by tribal communities. Under PESA, Gram Sabhas are responsible for safeguarding local traditions, customs, cultural identity, and community resources. The law was designed to empower indigenous communities and protect their autonomy in governance and development decisions.

However, reports indicate that in some areas these powers have been misused by local authorities to target individuals belonging to religious minorities, particularly tribal Christians. In certain instances, Gram Sabha resolutions have been used to restrict the construction of places of worship, prohibit prayer meetings, socially boycott converts, expel families from villages, and interfere with burial rights, including the exhumation of the bodies of Christian converts.¹⁹

¹³ providencemag.com/2024/04/forced-re-conversion-of-christians-in-india

¹⁴ “The Constitution of India”, Art. 15 and 17. Available at: indiankanon.org/doc/237570

¹⁵ Paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950. See: socialjustice.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/scorders-updated-30062016.pdf

¹⁶ “We’re Indians too”, *Ibid*, Open Doors, January 2019, pp. 26. Additionally, the exclusion of Dalit converts to Christianity and Islam from Scheduled Caste status under Paragraph 3 of the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 is under constitutional challenge before the Supreme Court in *Centre for Public Interest Litigation v. Union of India* (W.P. (C) No. 180 of 2004), on the ground that caste-based discrimination persists irrespective of religious conversion. The matter has been pending for over two decades. The Balakrishnan Commission, constituted in 2022, is separately examining the same question and has not yet submitted its report.

¹⁷ The Constitution (One Hundred and Third Amendment) Act, 2019, 12th January 2019. Available at: egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/195175.pdf

¹⁸ How a seventy-year-old Presidential Order still shapes Dalit after conversion, *The Leaflet*, December 2025. Available at: theleaflet.in/equality/how-a-seventy-year-old-presidential-order-still-shapes-dalit-life-after-conversion

¹⁹ “We’re Indians too”, *Ibid*, *Open Doors*, January 2019, pp. 25. Also see: thetablet.co.uk/news/supreme-court-halts-exhumations-in-indian-state-but-upholds-village-bans-on-christians

Recommendations:

To ensure the respect of fundamental rights of all Indians, Open Doors recommends:

- 1 The International Community should consider religious freedom and human rights a core and essential element of every trade, aid, and diplomatic relations with India.**
- 2 The Indian Government, together with state and local authorities, should take proactive and concrete steps to address violence, inciting speech, and discrimination against religious minorities by:**
 - Publicly condemning acts of violence, discrimination, and inciting speech against religious minorities, including those carried out by Hindutva extremist groups or public officials;
 - Ensuring prompt and impartial investigations into incidents of mob violence, attacks on places of worship, disruptions of peaceful religious activities, and other forms of communal hostility;
 - Holding perpetrators accountable through appropriate legal action, including in cases involving incitement to hostility, discrimination, or violence, in line with international human rights standards such as Articles 19(3) and 20(2) of the ICCPR.
- 3 To prevent the current extensive misuse of the “Anti-conversion laws” in the afore-mentioned states and the misinterpretation of specific sections of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the International Community should:**
 - Engage with national and state authorities to encourage the repeal of anti-conversion laws or, alternatively, reforms that clearly define terms such as “force,” “fraud,” “inducement,” “allurement,” and “improper conversion,” ensure equal application of the law across all religions, and establish safeguards and penalties against false accusations of improper conversion;
 - Support training for law enforcement officials and judges in states where such laws exist to ensure that anti-conversion laws are interpreted and applied in accordance with the Constitution of India and international human rights and freedom of religion or belief standards;
- 4 To ensure equal opportunities and non-discrimination of Dalit Christians and Muslims, the International Community should:**
 - Urge the Government of India to clarify that the peaceful exercise of constitutionally protected rights, including the right to assembly and to profess and practice religion, does not constitute a criminal offence under the relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, and to establish clear evidentiary standards before arrests or charges are made under these provisions.
- 5 To prevent the misuse of the PESA Law and the subsequent severe discrimination and persecution of religious minorities from tribal areas, the International Community should:**
 - Urge the Government of India to ensure that the PESA Act is not misused to target religious minorities. Governance structures under the Act, including Gram Sabhas, should operate in compliance with the Constitution of India and its fundamental rights protections, including freedom of religion or belief. Authorities should hold accountable those responsible for forced expulsion from communities or restrictions on the peaceful exercise of religion.

