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# INDIA

## Spotlight on Uttar Pradesh

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[research@od.org](mailto:research@od.org)

# India – Spotlight on Uttar Pradesh

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## General background



Uttar Pradesh (UP) is India’s most populous state with a population of just over 234 million people as per the World Christian Database 2023. Hindus number approximately 164 million or 70% of the population; Muslims number approximately 51 million or 22% of the population; the number of Christians is estimated at 600,000 or 0.25% of the population. It should be noted that this estimate for the number of Christians only reflects the official population count found in the 2011 Census. In practice, the Christian population is likely to be much higher since many Christians were declared as Hindu in the Census to enable them to retain benefits under

affirmative action policies and legal protections under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989.

In terms of caste in UP, the Scheduled Caste or Dalit population number 49 million or 21% of the population<sup>1</sup> while Other Backward Classes (OBC) or Shudra population number approximately 117 million or 50% of the population.<sup>2</sup> The Scheduled Tribe or Adivasi population number around two million or 0.8% of the population.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.newsclick.in/caste-ridden-uttar-pradesh-ghosi-poll-signal-2024>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/lucknow-news/uttar-pradesh-s-obc-population-estimated-at-over-50-101696332268523-amp.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://indiantribalheritage.org/?p=26772>

Uttar Pradesh is one of the most economically challenged states in the country with close to 80% percent of the population living in rural areas. The average literacy rate is 67% compared to the national average of 74%. The rate of poverty in UP is nearly 30%, and according to the government of India’s multidimensional poverty index, UP scores poorly in almost every indicator of poverty. In political terms, because of its large size, UP has 80 seats in the lower house of the parliament out of a total of 543, making it extremely important for any political party to control. In the general elections of 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won 71 seats out of 80, a gain of 61 seats compared to the previous election of 2009. In the general elections of 2019, BJP lost seats but still managed to win 62 seats out of 80.

## Political background

There are three major political parties that dominate state-level electoral politics in UP. The BJP won consecutive assembly elections in UP in 2017 (312 seats of 403) and 2022 (255 seats of 403) under the leadership of a hardline and radical right-wing leader called Yogi Adityanath. He was the chief priest of an important temple in UP for many years and since 2017, has also been the chief minister of UP. The other important party is the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) led by Dalit leader Mayawati who has been a three-time chief minister of UP in the past. The BSP represents the interests of the Dalit communities (mostly the Jatav Dalit caste) in UP. The third major political party is the Samajwadi Party (SP) led by OBC leader Akhilesh Yadav who was chief minister in 2012. The SP represents the interests of OBC communities (mostly the Yadav caste) and Muslim communities in the state. The table below lists the vote shares of these parties in the last elections (2022 assembly elections of UP and 2019 general election).

*Table lists the BJP, SP and BSP vote share in the 2022 assembly elections of UP and in the 2019 general election*

Election	Total seats	BJP vote share	SP vote share	BSP vote share
2022 Assembly Elections UP	403	41.29%	36.6%	12.88%
2019 General Elections UP	80	49.98%	18.11%	19.43%

Uttar Pradesh has been a hotbed of religious polarization since the early 1990s. In 1990, the then Prime Minister V.P. Singh who had formed the government under the Janata Party (with outside support from BJP) gave 27% reservation in government jobs and public sector higher education to OBCs. Following this move, upper caste communities conducted strikes across the country and the BJP quickly removed its support which led to the collapse of the V.P. Singh government within a year of its formation. In response to the OBC mobilization, the BJP also started to mobilize under the banner of Hindu nationalism, symbolized by the movement to build a temple for the Hindu god Ram in the city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. On 6 December 1992, religious vigilantes affiliated with the right-wing mass organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other organizations destroyed the 400-year-old Babri mosque.

The destruction of the mosque in full daylight and the helplessness of the secular political parties in preventing such destruction, opened the doors for hardline Hindu nationalism not just in UP but also across the country. Since 1992, the BJP's electoral fortunes have risen rapidly in Hindi speaking states and in national level politics. The BJP was formed in 1980 and, beginning with only 2 seats at the national level in the lower house of the Indian parliament (Lok Sabha) in 1984, they jumped to 161 seats by 1996.

In the state of UP as well as nearby Hindi speaking states in north India, the BJP has been anxious in maintaining its line on a Hindu majority versus religious minorities. They have been keen to prevent a consolidation of backward castes through the alliance of the two backward caste parties – BSP and SP. In order to prevent backward caste alliances, the BJP has been forced to provide a different framework for backward castes to join their party (which has historically been seen as an upper caste party). They have been able to draw other (including backward) castes to their ranks and unify them in the project of Hindu nationalism only by villainizing Muslims and Christians. For example, during his 2022 election campaign, Yogi Adityanath remarked that this assembly election would be a matter of 80% versus the 20%<sup>4</sup>, a clear reference to the contest between the Hindu majority and Muslim minority.

## History of Christianity in Uttar Pradesh

Christianity is believed to have gained a first footing in UP in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century in the city of Agra and subsequently continued to grow steadily under colonial rule. Various missionary organizations attempted to provide Christian literature in the vernacular and preach to the masses within the framework of local culture. They aimed to combine Christian teaching with the improvement of living conditions for the poorest and outcast sections of society, especially rural women. A church planting movement took off in the 1990s, but its timing was unfortunate as it coincided with the rise of radical Hindu politics of the BJP in the same period. As churches attempted to provide basic social services to the most oppressed, the Hindu community saw this as 'allurement' of the unsuspecting in an attempt to convert them to Christianity.

## The Anti-conversion law

The so-called 'anti-conversion' law (formally called the Uttar Pradesh Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, 2021) was promulgated in 2020 under the second term of the BJP's Yogi Adityanath government. This law is targeted at both Christians and Muslims. For Muslims, the BJP government's main objective was to prevent so-called 'Love Jihad', in which Muslim men were alleged to make Hindu young women fall in love with them so that they could be converted to Islam. Such unions (of Muslim men with Hindu women, but also of Muslim women with Hindu men) were criminalized.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/up-assembly-elections-its-80-vs-20-in-up-assembly-election-says-yogi-adityanath/article38214446.ece>

Further, the anti-conversion law also criminalizes Hindu women marrying Christian men since it leads the way to religious conversion for Hindu women. Section 5 (1) of the Act that prescribes punishment for unlawful conversion includes a minimum prison term of one year and a maximum of 10 years along with a fine of up to 50,000 Indian Rupees (approximately 600 USD). Onus of acquittal is a burden on the accused and offences under this Act is considered non-bailable. Even if any individual in general converts to Christianity, they have to now follow a complex route of paperwork and engage with bureaucracy including giving advance notice. This kind of process makes it more or less impossible for anyone to convert their religion officially and goes against the spirit of the fundamental right to practice and propagate a religion of one's choice as enshrined in Article 25 of the Indian Constitution.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, communities and pastors living and working in rural areas are regularly confronted by Hindu vigilantes who accuse them of carrying out 'illegal conversions' through allurements or fraud, and cases have been booked against both church leaders and ordinary Christians. In May 2023, the UP police had registered at least 433 cases of illegal conversion since the inception of the law in 2020.<sup>6</sup> The news organisation Article 14 conducted a study of 101 such cases and found that 63 of these cases were filed by 'third parties', i.e. neither by the person converting nor their families. This is a clear violation of Section 4 of the Act that only allows the aggrieved person or their relatives to file a complaint. Further, it was found in the same study that 32 reports filed by third parties were virtually identical, indicating that a 'template' approach is being used to target as large a number of Christians as possible.<sup>7</sup>

This aggressive application of the anti-conversion law typifies Yogi Adityanath government's approach to religious minorities in UP. Yogi Adityanath himself rose to political prominence when he started a vigilante right wing organization called *Hindu Yuva Vahini* (Hindu Youth Army) to catch Muslim cow smugglers. In reality, this was a cover for simply targeting poor Muslim cattle traders, farmers and workers in the meat industry. Yogi Adityanath's worship of the cow, and the corresponding attacks against religious minorities (who eat beef or work in the meat industry) have shaped right wing Hindu politics in Uttar Pradesh. His style of leadership has given rise to two major phenomena: First, the local police and system of law and order at the district level has become actively hostile to Christians; and secondly, Yogi Adityanath's profile and his politics has led to a mushrooming of right-wing Hindu vigilantes who hope to emulate Adityanath's career in politics. This combination of a hostile state and vigilante culture makes Uttar Pradesh possibly the most difficult state in India for Christians to live in. From January to November 2023, the United Christian Forum recorded 287 incidents of persecution against Christians in UP, the most in any Indian state in that time-period.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.constitutionofindia.net/articles/article-25-freedom-of-conscience-and-free-profession-practice-and-propagation-of-religion/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://article-14.com/post/hindutva-groups-are-misusing-up-s-anti-conversion-law-as-police-register-cases-with-no-legal-standing--65260e4c5987e>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## Notable incidents of persecution in 2023

**10 January 2023:** In Jaunpur district, the UP police followed orders from the District Magistrate (the highest official in district level administration) and seized the property of Pastor Durga Prasad Yadav who was building and supporting the Christian community in two villages of Jaunpur. Officials had alleged that when they went to pay a visit to the villages, some people threw stones at them and the administration's response was to blame it on the Christian community and take action against their leader, Durga Prasad Yadav. It has been reported that the value of the property seized was close to 120,000 USD. The incident was covered on a prime Hindi news television channel that only covered the side of the administration and did not provide even one sound-bite indicating the Christians' point of view.<sup>8</sup> Durga Prasad Yadav has been continually harassed by right-wing organizations since 2018, soon after the BJP came to power. The prayer-center he built was demolished in October 2023, the same month in which he was arrested. He now faces charges of illegal conversion under the recent anti-conversion law.<sup>9</sup>

**15 January 2023:** In the Ghazipur district of UP, a Hindu man Jitendra Singh accused Pastor Rajwar of pressuring him and his ailing wife to convert to Christianity, promising them miraculous healing. Following Singh's complaint to the police under the anti-conversion law, the pastor was remanded to judicial custody on the same day and the court turned down his appeal for bail. A church leader assisting the pastor with his legal case said that the pastor was conducting a routine prayer meeting and there was no question of conversions taking place.<sup>10</sup>

**24 December 2023:** On Christmas Eve 2023, a prayer meeting was held in a church close to the Mission school in Deoria district of UP. Some members of the Bajrang Dal, RSS and BJP complained to the police that there was illegal conversion going on in the church and mobilized a mob outside the church. Given the usual pattern in such cases (especially in UP), the pastor conducting the prayer meeting had to leave the place immediately in order to avoid detention, arrest and filing of a case on false accusations by police and the Hindu mob. Backed by a mob, leaders from the Bajrang Dal and BJP started questioning ordinary Christians who had come to the meeting asking them their full name, when they converted, why they had come for prayer and so on. A local Hindi news television channel covered the event and only emphasized the radical Hindu interpretation of the event and echoed the BJP leaders' demand for a full inquiry into the event. No Christian pastors or believers were provided a chance to explain what was really happening.<sup>11</sup>

**25 December 2023:** On Christmas day 2023, Bajrang Dal members stopped a prayer meeting in the town of Raebareli, alleging illegal conversion to Christianity. The police along with the mob disrupted the meeting and the police arrested three Christians based on these allegations.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> <https://twitter.com/HateDetectors/status/1745338332878619091>

<sup>9</sup> <https://thewire.in/rights/up-christian-prayer-centre-demolished-in-jaunpur-claiming-it-was-built-on-illegal-land>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ucanews.com/news/3-indian-christians-held-for-violating-conversion-law/103846>

<sup>11</sup> <https://twitter.com/WaqarHasan1231/status/1739160647441756490>

<sup>12</sup> <https://twitter.com/HateDetectors/status/1739560504039719239>

**31 December 2023:** Pastor Raj Kishore and a group of Christian friends were praying together in the church leader's house in Kothibhar, Maharajganj District, when police arrived at 11pm. The police had come following a complaint from a neighbor who accused the pastor of forcibly converting Hindus to Christianity. Pastor Kishore and fellow Christian Raj Kumar were booked and arrested under the Code Of Criminal Procedure (CrPc) Sections 151 ('Arrest to prevent the commission of cognizable offenses'), 107 ('breach of peace or disturb public tranquility') and 116 ('provides for the power of the Magistrate to take immediate measures for the execution of bond').<sup>13</sup>

Almost every week, from across different districts of UP, the right-wing vigilante organizations have been consistent in harassing pastors and churches carrying out routine activities in rural areas. The modus operandi remains the same. The mobs get intelligence from Hindu villagers about where and when prayer meetings are held. They then quickly mobilize and gather a mob at the scene using WhatsApp. Their leader complains to the police that illegal conversion is going on and they also invite their friends and sympathisers in the local television media. The police arrest the Christians (either under the anti-conversion law or for 'hurting religious sentiments') while the reporters cover only the Hindus' side of the story. As a result, public opinion builds up against Christians based on this false reporting and propaganda.

## Conclusion

Prime Minister Modi inaugurated the Ram temple in Ayodhya on 22 January 2024 (built over a mosque destroyed in 1992). Television channels had provided wall-to-wall coverage since December 2023. Despite India being a secular democracy, several states ruled by the BJP declared half-day or full-day holidays while central government offices were closed for half a day to celebrate this event. The consecration ceremony represented the fulfilment of a decade-long pledge to rebuild the temple. The inauguration of the temple has multiple political, cultural, and religious implications; it symbolizes the revival of ultra-religious nationalism and weaponization of [Hindu] faith for political gain. On the day of the temple consecration in at least six states - including Uttar Pradesh - Hindutva fanatics and vigilantes hoisted saffron flags on church roof-tops, vandalized mosques and incited communal violence.<sup>14</sup> Notably, there is a growing list of mosques, including the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi and Shahi Eidgah Mosque in Mathura (both in Uttar Pradesh), facing similar desecration and destruction.<sup>15</sup>

The 2024 general elections are due to be held in April or May in India. As usual, the most crucial state to win for both BJP and the united opposition parties will be the state of Uttar Pradesh with 80 seats. Given the electoral significance of this state, there is little doubt that persecution of religious minorities will increase drastically right up to the elections in an attempt to polarize society along lines of religious identity, i.e. Hindus versus the rest. In this atmosphere, the BJP's electoral chances are even higher if they can regularly create a perception of religious minorities being 'against Hindus'. Thus, it is highly likely that in the coming months, vigilante groups will be

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.worthynews.com/92289-india-two-christians-arrested-in-uttar-pradesh-state-for-praying-at-home-on-new-years-eve>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/ram-temple-consecration-violent-incidents-occur-in-at-least-6-states#read-more>

<sup>15</sup> <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/indias-hindutva-groups-have-the-gyanvapi-mosque-in-their-crosshairs/>

given full license to create havoc, and local officials and police will be asked to look the other way and instead target vulnerable communities belonging to religious minorities. It seems very likely that Uttar Pradesh will retain its position as the most difficult state in India for Christians to live in, if the BJP comes to power.