

WORLD WATCH LIST 2023

SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

WORLD WATCH LIST NO.
11

India



LEVELS OF VIOLENCE AND PRESSURE



Each of the six categories is scored out of a maximum of 16.7 points. The categories added together total 100 points (6 x 16.7 = 100).

Key findings

The rights of all categories of Christian communities are violated in India, since Hindu radicals view them all as alien to the nation. They want to cleanse their country from Islam and Christianity and do not shy away from using extensive violence to achieve this. Converts to Christianity from a Hindu background bear the brunt of persecution in India and are constantly under pressure to return to Hinduism, especially via campaigns known as [Ghar Wapsi](#) (homecoming). They are often physically assaulted and sometimes killed.

Quick facts

LEADER

Prime Minister Narendra Modi

POPULATION

1,406,632,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

69,494,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Hinduism

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



Christians by falsely accusing them. Even in states with no anti-conversion law, police have arrested Christians for evangelistic activities. India is the world's seventh-largest economy, but the gap between rich and poor is wide, and the poverty level is incredibly high. Christians are often among the lowest strata of society.

The caste system, a hierarchical stratification of Indian society dating back many centuries, remains omnipresent. Most Christians come from the lower castes (a group called the Dalits, ostracized as "Untouchables"). Many converted from Hinduism partly to escape their hopeless situation, only to find the same barriers exist inside the church. Christians are often deliberately overlooked in the distribution of aid. Government restrictions make it virtually impossible for churches to receive assistance from abroad to run social projects. The work of Christian non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is similarly restricted. [Foreign Contributions Regulation Act](#) (FCRA) licenses of thousands of NGOs, including hundreds of faith-based organizations, lapsed after the government said the organizations did not apply for renewal in time. In addition, during the year the government suspended FCRA licenses of hundreds of NGOs, including some that were faith-based.

Internet freedom has declined in recent years. There have been arrests for online activity, and internet shut-downs during times of perceived unrest and disinformation. There is a high level of physical violence; honor killings, acid throwing, mob beatings and other atrocities happen regularly all over the country. The police also have a reputation for corruption, brutality and mistreating Christians who are in custody. Another major problem for Christians is the Maoists (otherwise known as Naxalites), who are Communist militants controlling some of the poorest rural regions of India. Christians living in Naxalite-controlled areas are constantly monitored and cannot openly practice their faith. If they do, the Naxalites beat or even execute them. There are ongoing conflicts between India and its neighbors, especially Pakistan, China, and Nepal.

Hinduism dominates India, followed by Islam. India has the second-largest population of Muslims in the world, after Indonesia. Within Christianity, the fastest-growing communities are the non-traditional, including converts. Bureaucracy and corruption are notorious. If Christians try to build or renovate a church, they are likely to encounter red tape and opposition and be asked for bribes.

Context

Main Religions	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	69,494,000	4.9
Hindus	1,013,290,000	72.0
Muslims	207,015,000	14.7
Ethno-religionists	53,054,000	3.8

Source²

India is the seventh-largest country in the world and the second most populous. It is a federation with a central government in New Delhi which controls foreign affairs, the armed forces and the economy. The Constitution of India declares the country to be a secular state. Hindu radicals are calling to change this and make Hinduism the national religion. They also want to impose anti-conversion legislation at the national level. Modi, criticized for his inaction to protect hundreds of Muslims killed by Hindu extremists in the pogroms that took place in Gujarat in 2002, was elected as India's Prime Minister in 2014. He was re-elected with absolute majority in 2019. Since Modi became Prime Minister, the annual reported number of violent attacks against Christians has increased dramatically. India's Freedom of Religion Acts or "anti-forced-conversion" laws are state-level statutes that have been enacted to regulate religious conversions. However, in practice, these laws, as well as the Indian Penal Code, are misused to punish

¹ Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

² Data source: Johnson T M and Zurlo G A, eds, World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed April 2022)

How the situation varies by region

There are no particular hotspots of religious freedom violations in India. The worst regions are the states where the BJP is a major factor in the state government, but that can change every five years due to elections. Hindu extremist groups have established their offices across the country, including remote villages. They keep a close watch on the events where Christians preach about their religion. In areas where BJP is not in power, they are a powerful opposition party. Although monitoring is high, Christians only run into problems when they start preaching about Christianity.

Who is affected?

Communities of expatriate Christians

There are several expatriate groups active in India. It is not only Christians from Western countries living in India who have their own congregations, but also refugees. One example is the Afghan community that has a congregation in New Delhi.

Historical Christian communities

These communities (such as the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican-based churches) bear witness that Christians have been in India for many centuries, with the (Orthodox) Kerala Mar Thoma Church dating back to the 3rd century AD.

Converts to Christianity

Christian converts from a Hindu background bear the brunt of religious freedom violations in India. These Christians face harassment on an almost daily basis and are constantly under pressure to return to Hinduism. Other converts (from Islam, Sikhism, and Buddhism) also face pressure from their social environment, but their numbers are far smaller. Christians with a Muslim background face violence, intolerance, and discrimination only in areas where there is a high concentration of Muslims in the local population.

Non-traditional Christian communities

After converts, Christians from Baptist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches are regarded as the second main target of radical Hindus because of their involvement in outreach activities and conversion.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Religious nationalism – Hindu:

The assertiveness and aggressiveness of all kinds of Hindu organizations has increased over the years. They claim that India belongs to Hinduism and that other religions should be driven out of the country. Radical Hinduism is by far the main persecutor in India. It is vocal, omnipresent, and very violent. Other forms of religious nationalism in India further worsen the score in this area, including aggression from radical groups such as Buddhist extremists in Ladakh, forms of Neo-Buddhism in Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh, and Sikh extremists in Punjab. Since 2014, religious nationalism is also influencing tribal groups, causing them to regard their religions as being related to Hinduism.

Dictatorial paranoia blended with religious nationalism – Hindu:

After winning the May 2019 elections, the BJP formed a new government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who is being hailed as the strong man to lead India. As a result, dictatorial tendencies are emerging. Social media control, inflammatory speeches, the gagging of media who question government policies and statistics are just some signs of a growing dictatorial movement within government circles. Attacks (including fake news) have been unleashed by state machinery on journalists, opposition leaders, human rights activists and media chiefs. The propaganda against 'alien' religions like Islam and Christianity is also increasing.

Clan oppression:

Clan oppression is very strong in parts of northern India. In what is called the Jat Belt (regions of Punjab, Haryana and parts of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh), the "Khap panchayats" (clan courts) hold sway. They are regarded as having power over life and death, and function independently of the country's legal system. The law often turns a blind eye. The police are collaborative; its membership is largely from the same communities which run the Khaps. The Khaps seem to be against modernity, against marrying outside the community rules of kinship and desirability in religion and status. Naturally, conversion to Christianity is a serious crime in their eyes. Clan oppression is rapidly becoming a serious threat to the church in India. In the tribal villages of mainland India, where the Christian population is scarce, many converts have been forced into "Ghar Wapsi" re-conversion. Influenced by fanatical Hindus, tribal village leaders impose heavy fines on Christians and vandalize their homes. The Christians are socially boycotted and will be excommunicated if they refuse to comply with the leaders' orders.

Ethno-religious hostility blended with religious nationalism – Hindu:

In the states of Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, southern Madhya Pradesh, southern Gujarat, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and Manipur, there are areas with tribal societies. The Hindu radical movement RSS has successfully infiltrated these tribal societies and has turned them against the Christian presence in those areas. In the tribal areas, people have come (and are still coming) to Christian faith. This is not something new; the church has been in tribal areas for at least 100-150 years and experienced little violent opposition in that time. But since the late 1990s, the RSS, Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and their affiliates have been working systematically to divide tribal societies and generate opposition towards Christians. Increasingly, tribal converts are being threatened, boycotted socially, expelled, denied drinking water, raped and even murdered. In a number of cases, the construction of church buildings has been forcibly stopped by villagers. Ethno-religious hostility is thus rapidly becoming a serious threat to the church in India.

How are men and women differently affected?

WOMEN

Persecution of Christian women often targets their physical body through molestation, rape and sexual harassment. Daughters, sisters and wives of pastors are particularly vulnerable. Sexual attacks serve to shame the family, as her sexual purity connotes her family's honor. Physical attacks have included acid attacks, brutal beatings and killings. Converts to Christianity risk house arrest, forced marriage, forced divorce, being expelled from their home and being socially isolated. Many women from the lowest caste have turned to Christianity; this makes them a double target, for being Dalit and now Christian.

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied communal resources
- Denied food or water
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Imprisonment by the government
- Incarceration by family/house arrest
- Trafficking
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – sexual
- Violence – verbal

MEN

Men are seen as physically strong, so the persecution of Christian men targets their physical strength as well as their position as head of the household. Violations against men includes harsh beatings, killings and emotional torture. Church leaders are particularly vulnerable to attacks from Hindu radicals; being a pastor continues to be one of the riskiest vocations in the country. Converts may be socially isolated by their community and family, and excluded from accessing communal resources. False charges are often brought against men, such as denigrating Hindu gods and goddesses.

- Denied access to social community / networks
- Denied communal resources
- Denied food or water
- Denied inheritance of possessions
- Discrimination/harassment via education
- Economic harassment via work/job/business
- Economic harassment via fines
- False charges
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by the government
- Military / militia conscription / service against conscience
- Travel bans / restrictions on movement
- Violence – death
- Violence – physical
- Violence – psychological
- Violence – verbal

WWL 5 year trend

WWL Year	Position on Open Doors World Watch List	Persecution rounded score out of 100
2023	11	82
2022	10	82
2021	10	83
2020	10	83
2019	10	83

Although the score for India has not changed compared to last year, this does not mean that the situation for Christians has improved. Overall violence remains at an extreme level and levels of pressure in the spheres of life also remain very high.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- At least nine Christian women were subjected to rape or attempted rape, or whose private parts were deliberately targeted for beating. In one of the cases, the victim was raped and killed.
- At least 34 Christian women were forced to marry non-Christians.
- At least 1,711 Christians were detained for faith-related reasons.
- There were reports of physical abuse (including death threats), directly affecting 75,081 Christians.

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians physically or mentally abused	Christians internally displaced
2023	17	67	10,000*	834
2022	10	47	1779	380

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period - for full results see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10, 100* or 1000*) is given which in reality could be significantly higher.*

Private life

Talking about one's Christian faith is now generally regarded as a form of evangelism. Being seen praying is no longer risky just for converts, but for all Christians, except in two or three northeastern states. Constitutionally-protected activities such as church services can lead to false accusations of forced conversion by Hindu radicals. Christians, especially leaders, can be arrested on such charges, with physical violence often involved. It is impossible for foreign Christians to obtain a missionary visa.

Family life

Although the Juvenile Justice Act allows the adoption of Hindu children by non-Hindu parents, Christians still find it extremely difficult to adopt in practice. Procedures are very complicated, and adoption panel members are sometimes biased against Christians. Christian children are forced to participate in Hindu aspects of the curriculum, even in Christian schools, such as yoga, Hindu literature and mythology. Open-air baptisms are now regarded as too risky for both the pastor conducting the baptism and the person getting baptized. Christian children, especially those of converts, increasingly experience discrimination and physical harassment due to Hindu radical influence.

Community life

Over the past five years, monitoring of Christians by Hindu radical organizations and community authorities has increased. The goal is to stop any form of evangelism. There has been an increase in

harassment, threats and social discrimination. Ghar Wapsi (homecoming) reconversion campaigns succeed in part due to community pressure on Christians.

National life

Anti-conversion legislation, which limits religious freedom, is in force in 11 states. Christian organizations receiving funds from abroad have always been restricted through the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act because they are viewed as engaging in proselytization or advocacy. The media, especially in Indian dialects, are generally very biased against Christians and positively hostile in rural areas, where propaganda and incitement to violence against Christians from Hindu extremists is given plenty of airtime.

Church life

The state monitors Christian activities and has imposed many restrictions (e.g., on foreign funding, invitations to foreign missionaries, difficulties with registration and anti-conversion laws). Local authorities and Hindu extremists closely monitor Christians' internet activity, and even tourists visiting must sign a statement saying that they will not carry out preaching or conversion activities. Many Christian foreigners living in India on a work visa have been deported. Many foreigners of Indian origin have been deported because they were part of churches or Christian groups in India. Any Christian speaking out against an attack risks further violence.

International obligations & rights violated

India has committed to respect and protect fundamental rights in the following international treaties:

1. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)
2. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)
3. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
4. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

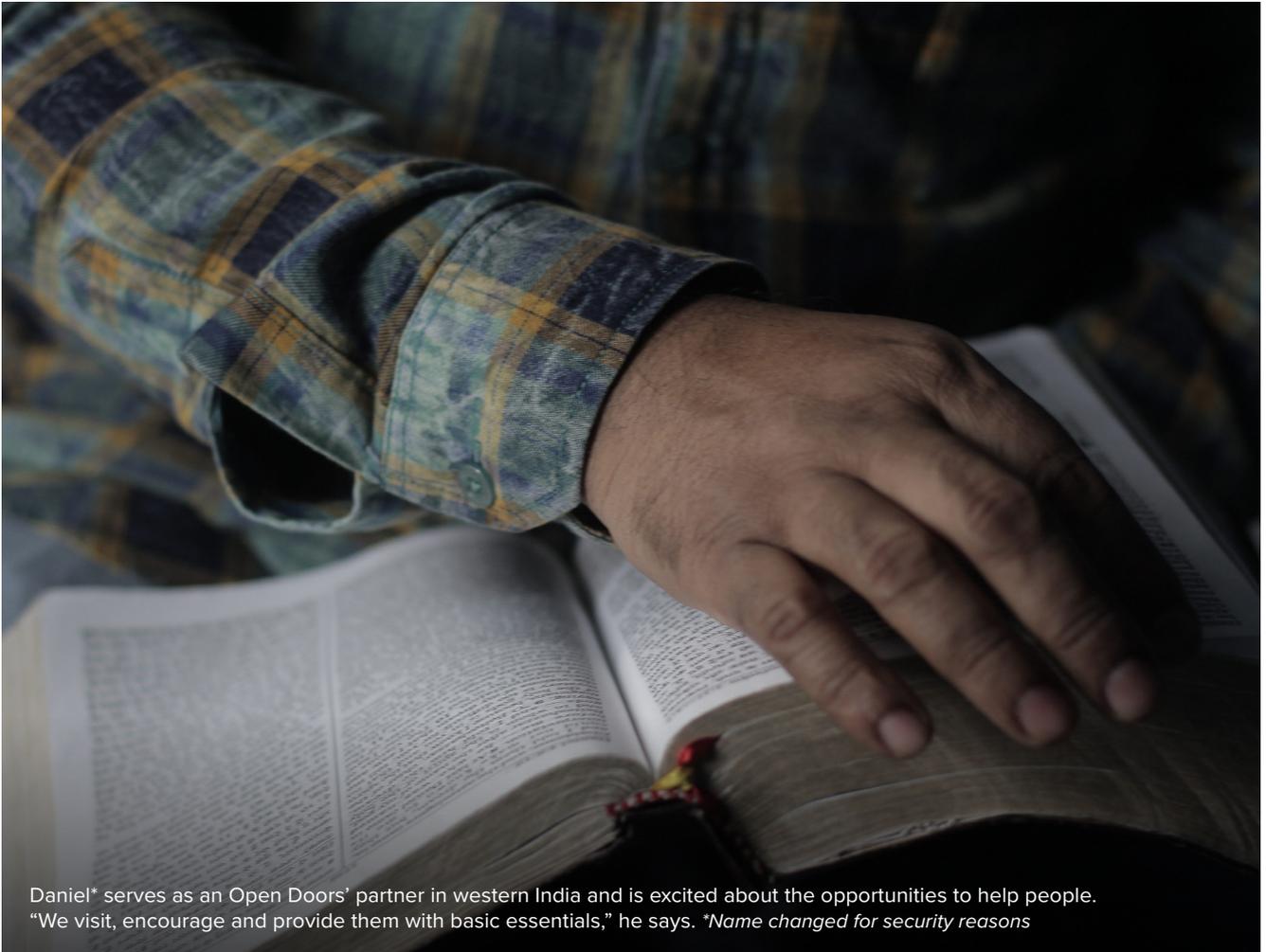
India is not fulfilling its international obligations by regularly violating or failing to protect the following rights of Christians:

- Christians are killed for their faith (ICCPR Art. 6)
- Christian women and girls are raped and sexually abused because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 7)
- Christians are attacked, ostracized, and unjustly accused of forcefully converting others (ICCPR Art. 18)
- Christians are victims of incendiary speech and smear campaigns that incite violence and discrimination (ICCPR Art. 20)
- Peaceful religious gatherings of Christians are disrupted by mobs and attacks, in violation of the right to peaceful assembly (ICCPR Art. 21)
- Christian Dalits are excluded from government affirmative action because of their faith (ICCPR Art. 26 and ICESCR Art. 11)



Situation of other religious minorities

Hindu radicals have called both Islam and Christianity “alien” religions that should eventually be removed from the country. Thus, the Muslim minority experiences similar treatment as Christians do at the hands of militant Hindus. Buddhists and Sikhs find they are more acceptable to Hindu radicals, since their religions originate from the territory of India.



Daniel* serves as an Open Doors' partner in western India and is excited about the opportunities to help people. "We visit, encourage and provide them with basic essentials," he says. **Name changed for security reasons*

Open Doors in India

The work of Open Doors local partners in India is focused on:

- Distribution of Bibles
- Training: Holistic training including persecution preparedness
- SED: Livelihood and community development for persecuted Christians
- Urgent Aid: Help to the victims of persecution

About this brief

- This brief is a summary of the Full Country Dossier produced annually by World Watch Research (WWR), the research department of Open Doors International. It may be used and distributed free of charge, but please always acknowledge the source as: © 2023 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2023 reporting period was 01 October 2021 - 30 September 2022.
- The Full Country Dossier for this country can be accessed [here](#) (password: freedom). The latest update of WWL methodology - as well as the complete WWL 2023 ranking and reports - can be found [here](#) (password: freedom).

Many photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
