

WORLD WATCH LIST 2024

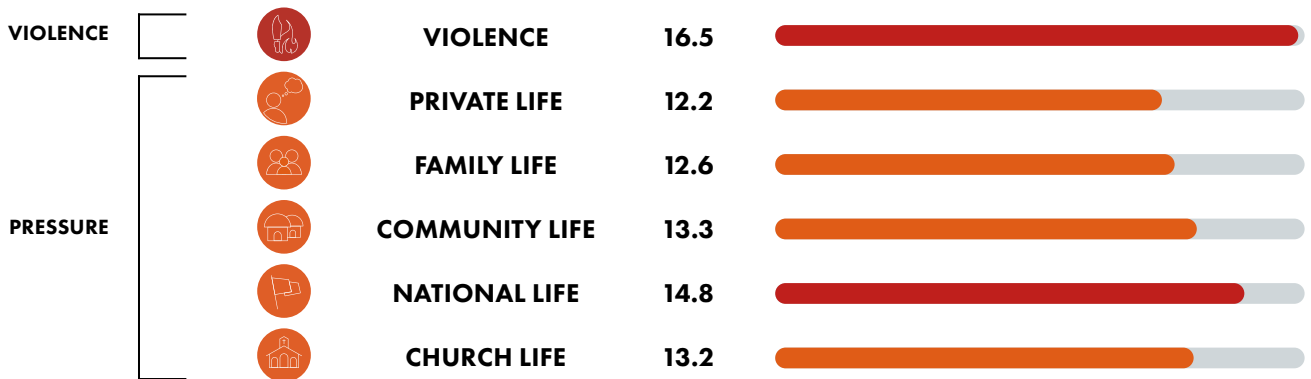
SITUATION OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM FOR CHRISTIANS

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 Hindutva radicals view them all as alien to the nation. They want to cleanse their country of 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

1,419,656,000

NUMBER OF CHRISTIANS

71,120,000¹

MAIN RELIGION

Hinduism

GOVERNMENT

Federal Parliamentary Republic



Context

Religious Context	Number of adherents	Percentage
Christians	71,120,000	5.0
Hindus	1,019,981,000	71.8
Muslims	211,324,000	14.9
Ethno-religionists	52,033,000	3.7

Source²

The Constitution of India declares the country to be a secular state. Hindu radicals are trying to change this and make Hinduism the national religion. Narendra 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 an 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 Christians by falsely accusing them of conversion. Even in states with no anti-conversion law, police have arrested Christians for evangelistic activities. Anti-conversion laws exist

in eleven states: Odisha (1967), Madhya Pradesh (1968), Arunachal Pradesh (1978), Chhattisgarh (2000), Gujarat (2003), Himachal Pradesh (2006/2019), Jharkhand (2017), Uttarakhand (2018), Uttar Pradesh (2020), Haryana (2022) and Karnataka (2022). The anti-conversion law in Arunachal Pradesh has not been fully implemented due to a lack of subsidiary rules; and the state of Rajasthan passed an anti-conversion bill, but it has yet to be signed by the President of India to make it law. The anti-conversion law in Karnataka is due to be [revised or withdrawn](#) in 2023 (WWR, 19 June 2023).

India is the world's seventh-largest economy, but the gap between rich and poor is wide, and the poverty level is incredibly high. The caste system, a hierarchical stratification of Indian society dating back many centuries, remains omnipresent. Most Christians come from the scheduled castes (a group called the Dalits, ostracized as "Untouchables") and scheduled tribes (a group called the Adivasis/Janjatis). Many converted from Hinduism partly to escape their hopeless situation, only to find the same barriers exist inside the church.

The Christian community in India is the second most literate community in India; at the same time, it is the [largest unemployed group](#) among all minorities in India. Christians are further facing daily challenges of discrimination, inadequate public healthcare and malnutrition. 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

¹ Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

² Data source: Todd M. Johnson and Gina A. Zurlo, eds., World Christian Database (Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed March 2023)

restricted. The [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.

There is a high level of physical violence; honor killings, acid throwing, mob beatings and other atrocities happen regularly all over the country. The rampant circulation of disinformation targeting Christian activities (such as prayer meetings or preaching) by vigilante groups on social media has created enabling conditions for mob beatings and other atrocities against Christians. 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 seriously threaten them.

In 2023, violence erupted between the Meitei (mostly Hindu) and Kuki (mostly Christian) ethnic groups in Manipur state. The violence, led by the majority Meitei community, which caused well over 200 churches to go up in flames, was sparked by an affirmative action controversy which saw Kukis protest against a demand seeking tribal status for the Meiteis. According to BBC News reporting on 12 July 2023: “Now the Kuki have demanded ‘[territorial autonomy](#)’ for the group, a euphemism for a separate, independent administration. The Meitei have warned that any dismemberment of Manipur is out of question. Life and work between the two communities has stalled. Internet has been cut all over the state, further heightening the isolation.” It is likely that ethnic unrest will continue until a political resolution is found.

How the situation varies by region

There are no particular hotspots for 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 offices across the country, including remote villages. They keep a close watch on 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](#)

This category is not included in the WWL scoring and analysis.

[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. They are affected by religious freedom violations, but are generally less affected than the other categories of Christian communities.

[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 the second-biggest target of radical Hindus because of their involvement in outreach activities and conversion.



Main sources of persecution and discrimination

Religious nationalism

The assertiveness and aggressiveness of all kinds of Hindutva ideology inspired organizations have 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.

Dictatorial paranoia - blended with religious nationalism

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 and propaganda against 'alien' religions like Islam and Christianity are just some of the signs of a growing dictatorial movement within government circles.

Ethno-religious hostility - blended with religious nationalism

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. 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.

Clan oppression

This is very strong in parts of northern India. In what is called the Jat Belt (i.e., 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, which often turns a blind eye. The police is collaborative; its membership comes largely from the same communities that run the Khaps. Naturally, conversion to Christianity is a serious crime in their eyes.



How are men and women differently affected?

Women

Persecution of Christian women often occurs through 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.

Female typical pressure points:

- Abduction
- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied communal resources
- Forced divorce
- Forced marriage
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Forced to flee town/country
- Incarceration by family (house arrest)
- Trafficking
- 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, economically boycotted and excluded from accessing communal resources. False charges are often brought against men, such as denigrating Hindu gods and goddesses.

Male typical pressure points:

- Denied access to social community/networks
- Denied communal resources
- Denied food or water
- Denied inheritance of possessions
- Economic harassment via business/job/work access
- Economic harassment via fines
- False charges
- Forced out of home – expulsion
- Imprisonment by 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
2024	11	83
2023	11	82
2022	10	82
2021	10	83
2020	10	83

The rise in the overall score is very small. There was an increase in the violence score from 15.7 points in WWL 2023 to 16.5, which is almost the maximum level. All categories of

Christian communities face hostility from Hindu radicals who view Christians as alien to the nation. They want to cleanse their country of Islam and Christianity and do not shy away from using extensive mob 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. The world watched in horror when ethno-religious violence erupted in May 2023 in the north eastern state of Manipur. What began as a dispute between ethnic groups took on a disturbing religious dimension, as Christians were targeted across the ethnic groups. Thousands of Christians were displaced, hundreds of churches and public Christian properties were burned down and many believers were killed. India also witnessed mob attacks against Christians in Chhattisgarh State in January 2023. Thousands of Christians were chased out of their homes and villages and Christian properties were destroyed. They had to take shelter in indoor stadiums and other locations.

Examples of violence in the reporting period

- 28 November 2022 – Azamgarh, Uttar Pradesh:** Police arrested nine pastors for conversion activities. One of the pastors was hosting a wedding reception in his home for his daughter and son-in-law when police arrived, arrested the host, eight others, and the just-married couple on charges of conducting illegal conversions and confiscated Bibles and other Christian materials (IRFR 2022 India).
- 18 December 2022 – Narayanpur and Kondagaon Districts of Chhattisgarh state:** Local villagers forced approximately 200 Christians from 70 families to leave their homes after 20 “coordinated attacks” on Christians around the state that day. “According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India, the villagers said the Christians must renounce their faith or leave the area. When some protested, they were beaten. The fellowship said some Christians were hospitalized because of their injuries, and police refused to take action when the victims filed complaints against their attackers.” (IRFR 2022 India).
- 4 May 2023 – Churachandpur area of Imphal city in Manipur:** Meitei mobs vandalized and burned down more than 200 churches of the Manipur Presbyterian Singlup during the violence that broke out on 4 May as per a list published by Churachandpur District Christian Goodwill Church on 16 May. The Evangelical Churches Association and the Manipur Presbyterian Church Synod lost 14 churches each. Tuithaphai Presbyterian Church (Manipur Synod) lost 13 churches. All these churches were destroyed within two or three days of the violence breaking out. The Chief Minister (himself a Meitei) and the police force have not been able to prevent the violence and the attack against Kukis (majority of whom are Christians) and their churches continues ([Matters India, 16 May 2023](#)).

WWL Year	Christians killed	Churches or Christian buildings attacked or closed	Christians’ private property damaged or confiscated	Christians internally displaced
2024	160	2228	5878	62,119
2023	17	67	180	834

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 north eastern 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, especially around community celebrations of key Christian festivals such as Easter, Christmas, New Years etc. 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. All major social media platforms have hate speech against Christians by radical Hindu leaders. Such speech is prevalent, especially in Indian languages and dialects.

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 under 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 against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)
5. 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

The following examples illustrate the situation of religious minorities in India:

- **2 October, 2022:** The Madhya Pradesh state police (in Mandsaur district) filed a case of attempted murder and rioting against 19 Muslim men accused of throwing stones at a garba event and detained seven of them. Two days later, without any legal authorization, the authorities demolished the homes of three of the men, claiming they were constructed illegally (4 October, 2022, [Hindustan Times](#)).
- **March 2023:** Indian authorities executed massive mobilizations of paramilitary and police forces, conducted multiple coordinated arrests, imposed mobile internet data blackouts, blocked SMS services, censored media, and disproportionately targeted Sikhs and political dissenters across Punjab. These actions not only contradict human rights freedoms but also risk exacerbating civil unrest and alienation of a religious minority community ([21 March, 2023](#)).
- **August 2023:** Zarin Khan, a 23 year old physiotherapist from Madhya Pradesh, a BJP-ruled state, ended up in hospital after she was set upon by a mob of four Hindu men. According to her account, they began beating her and attacking her with bats and iron rods, tearing off her hijab, molesting her and shouting religious insults at her. As she pleaded for help they laughed and told her: “You can’t do anything, the administration is ours.” (4 August, 2023, [The Guardian](#)).

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
- Socio-economic development: 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: © 2024 Open Doors International.
- The WWL 2024 reporting period was 01 October 2022 - 30 September 2023.
- All brief country profiles can be accessed under 'Advocacy resources' on the research pages of the Open Doors International website, along with the more detailed Full Country Dossiers and the latest update of [WWL Methodology](#). These are also available at the [Open Doors Analytical](#) website (password: freedom).

Most of the photos in this dossier are for illustrative purposes.
