

# INDIA 2021 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

## Executive Summary

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion; mandates a secular state; requires the state to treat all religions impartially; and prohibits discrimination based on religion. It also states that citizens must practice their faith in a way that does not adversely affect public order, morality, or health. Ten of 28 states have laws restricting religious conversions. Four state governments have laws imposing penalties against so-called forced religious conversions for the purpose of marriage although some state high courts have dismissed cases charged under this law. In August, two Muslim men from Jamshedpur in Jharkhand State filed a complaint against local police alleging that seven police officers sexually abused them during interrogation and used anti-Islamic slurs. According to media, police took no action on the complaint by year's end. Police made several arrests during the year under laws that restrict religious conversion, and several state governments announced plans to strengthen existing legislation or develop new legislation restricting religious conversion. According to the United Christian Forum (UCF), a Christian rights nongovernmental organization (NGO), in the period between January and June, 29 Christians were arrested in three states on suspicion of forceful or fraudulent religious conversions under the laws restricting religious conversions in those states. Some NGOs reported that the government failed to prevent or stop attacks on religious minorities. A faith-based NGO stated in its annual report that out of 112 complaints of violence filed by Christian victims from January to August, police filed official reports (First Information Report or FIR) in 25 cases. There were no updates on these cases by the end of the year. Police arrested non-Hindus for making comments in the media or on social media that were considered offensive to Hindus or Hinduism. NGOs, including faith-based organizations, continued to criticize 2020 amendments passed to the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA) as constraining civil society by reducing the amount of foreign funding that NGOs, including religious organizations, could use for administrative purposes and adding onerous oversight and certification requirements. The government continued to say the law strengthened oversight and accountability of foreign NGO funding in the country. According to media reports, FCRA licenses of 5,789 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 179 NGOs, including some that were faith-based. The states of Assam and Karnataka enacted legislation imposing strict penalties for killing cattle; 25 of

28 states now have similar restrictions. The most recent National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) report, *Crime in India for 2020*, released in September, said that the violence in New Delhi in February 2020 following passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) resulted from a “feeling of discrimination” among the Muslim community. During the year, Delhi courts acquitted some of those arrested on charges related to the protests and convicted one Hindu participant. Various courts criticized the Delhi police for inadequate investigation of the protests. Politicians made inflammatory public remarks or social media posts about religious minorities. For example, Mandan Kaushik, president of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Uttarakhand State, told the media in October that “Our party line is clear that no [religious] conversion [from Hinduism] will be tolerated.” In May, the Assam government removed theological content from the curriculum of more than 700 state-run madrassahs and state-run Sanskrit schools, which converted them into regular public schools. Analysts indicated that madrassahs were impacted in greater numbers.

Attacks on members of religious minority communities, including killings, assaults, and intimidation, occurred throughout the year. These included incidents of “cow vigilantism” against non-Hindus based on allegations of cow slaughter or trade in beef. According to the UCF, the number of violent attacks against Christians in the country rose to 486 during the year from 279 in 2020. According to Catholic news agency *Agenzia Fides*, Hindus committed 13 instances of violence and threats against Christian communities in Uttarakhand, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, and Delhi. According to UCF, most of the incidents were reported in states ruled by the BJP and included attacks on pastors, disruption of worship services, and vandalism. The NGOs United Against Hate, the Association for Protection of Civil Rights, and UCF released a joint report that noted more than 500 incidents of violence against Christians reported to UCF’s hotline during the year. Suspected terrorists targeted and killed civilians and migrants from the Hindu and Sikh minorities, including Hindu migrant laborers from Bihar, in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. As of December, alleged terrorists had killed 39 civilians including two schoolteachers from the Hindu and Sikh communities. According to media reports, the killings caused widespread fear among Hindus and Sikhs in the Kashmir valley, leading hundreds of migrants to depart Jammu and Kashmir. There were reports of vandalism against Muslim facilities during the year, including by Hindu nationalist groups damaging mosques, shops, and houses belonging to the Muslim community across Tripura State in October. Media reports said these attacks occurred in retaliation for attacks on minority Hindus in Bangladesh during the Durga Puja festival in that country. A mob killed four Muslim men on June 20 in Tripura on

suspicion of cattle smuggling. On June 21, suspected cow vigilantes killed Muslim Aijaz Dar in Rajouri District of Jammu and Kashmir. Cow vigilantes allegedly killed Babu Bheel, a member of a Rajasthan tribal community, on June 14. Religious leaders, academics, and activists made inflammatory remarks about religious minorities. During a Hindu religious gathering in Hardiwar, Uttarakhand State, December 17-19, Yati Narasinghanand Saraswati, described as a Hindu religious extremist, called upon Hindus to “take up weapons against Muslims” and “wage a war against Muslims.” On December 21, police named Narasinghanand and seven others for “deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings” in multiple FIRs; police arrested Narasinghanand a few weeks later, although he was subsequently released on bail. The others had not been arrested by year’s end. The Pew Research study on “Religion in India” released in July noted that most Indians valued religious tolerance but preferred living religiously segregated lives. Eighty-nine percent of Muslims and Christians surveyed said they were “very free to practice their own religion” but 65 percent of Hindus and Muslims said they believed communal violence between religious groups was “a problem” for the country. Freedom House downgraded the country’s ranking from “free” to “partly free” during the year in part due to policies described as advancing Hindu nationalist objectives.

During the year, U.S. embassy officials, including the Chargés d’Affaires, engaged with members of parliament, politicians from multiple political parties, religious leaders, representatives of faith-based organizations, and civil society members to discuss the importance of religious freedom and the responsibility of democracies to ensure the rights of religious minorities. During engagements with political parties, civil society representatives, religious freedom activists, and leaders of various faith communities, U.S. government officials discussed the importance of religious freedom and pluralism; the value of interfaith dialogue, and the operating environment for faith-based NGOs. Throughout the year, the Chargés d’Affaires met with religious communities, including representatives of the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh faiths to discuss their perspectives and views on religious freedom issues. In May, the embassy organized a virtual interfaith dialogue during Ramadan to emphasize the U.S. government’s commitment to religious freedom and interfaith harmony. In July, the Secretary of State, during his visit to the country, addressed the importance of freedom of religion and belief in his opening remarks and held a roundtable with diverse faith leaders to discuss inclusive development.

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 billion (midyear 2021). According to the 2011 national census, the most recent year for which disaggregated figures are available, Hindus constitute 79.8 percent of the population, Muslims 14.2 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, and Sikhs 1.7 percent. Groups that together constitute fewer than 2 percent of the population include Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians (Parsis), Jews, and Baha'is. In government statistics, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs officially identifies as Hindus more than 104 million members of Scheduled Tribes – indigenous groups historically outside the caste system who often practice indigenous religious beliefs – although an estimated 10 million of those listed as Scheduled Tribe members are Christians according to the 2011 census.

According to government estimates, there are large Muslim populations in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala, and the Union Territories of Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir. In Lakshadweep and Jammu and Kashmir, Muslims account for 95 percent and 68.3 percent of the population, respectively. Slightly more than 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni, with the remainder mostly Shia. According to media reports during the year, there are an estimated 150,000 Ahmadi Muslims in the country. According to government estimates, Christian populations are distributed throughout the country but in greater concentrations in the northeast as well as in the states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Three northeastern states have majority Christian populations: Nagaland (90 percent), Mizoram (87 percent), and Meghalaya (70 percent). Sikhs constitute 54 percent of the population of Punjab. The Dalai Lama's office states there are significant resettled Tibetan Buddhist communities in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, and Uttarakhand States, and Delhi. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and media reports, there are approximately 100,000 Tibetan Buddhists in the country. According to media reports, approximately 40,000 Muslim Rohingya refugees from Burma live in the country. UNHCR estimated it received 1,800 requests for refugee registration since August 2021 and projects it will receive 3,500-5,000 refugee registration requests by the end of 2022.

## **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

### **Legal Framework**

The constitution mandates a secular state and provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to profess, practice, and propagate religion freely, subject to considerations of public order, morality, and health. It prohibits

government discrimination based on religion, including for employment, as well as religiously based restrictions on access to public or private establishments. The constitution states that religious groups have the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes, manage their own affairs in religious matters, and own, acquire, and administer property. It prohibits the use of public funds to support any religion. National and state laws make freedom of religion “subject to public order, morality, and health.” The constitution stipulates that the state shall endeavor to create a uniform civil code applicable to members of all religions across the country.

Federal law empowers the government to ban religious organizations that provoke intercommunal tensions, are involved in terrorism or sedition, or violate laws governing foreign contributions.

Ten of the 28 states have laws restricting religious conversion: Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand. Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh States prohibit religious conversion by “force,” “allurement,” or “fraudulent means” including marriage “with the intention of conversion” and require district authorities to be informed of any intended conversions one month in advance. Himachal Pradesh and Odisha States maintain similar prohibitions against conversion through “force,” “inducement,” or “fraud,” which would include the provision of any gifts, promises of a better life, free education, and other standard charitable activities, and bar individuals from abetting such conversions. Odisha State requires individuals wishing to convert to another religion and clergy intending to officiate at a conversion ceremony to submit formal notification to the government. The notification procedures state that police must ascertain if there are objections to the conversion. Any person may object. Four state governments have laws imposing penalties against “forced” religious conversions for the purpose of marriage (Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh), although some state high courts have dismissed cases charged under this law. By year’s end, four other state governments announced plans to enact similar legislative measures: Haryana, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Assam. Since March, Madhya Pradesh has required prior permission from a district official to convert to a spouse’s faith in case of interfaith marriage, has permitted the annulment of a fraudulent marriage, and set the penalties for violators at a prison term of up to 10 years without bail and fines up to 100,000 rupees (\$1,300).

Violators, including missionaries, are subject to fines and other penalties, such as prison sentences of up to three years in Chhattisgarh and up to four years in Madhya Pradesh if converts are minors, women, or members of Scheduled Castes or Scheduled Tribes. Gujarat mandates prior permission from the district magistrate for any form of conversion and punishes “forced” conversions with up to three years of imprisonment and a fine up to 50,000 rupees (\$670). In amendments to its law on freedom of religion in April, Gujarat also imposes sentences of between three and 10 years in prison and fines of up to 50,000 rupees (\$670) for forcible or fraudulent religious conversions through marriage. In Himachal Pradesh, penalties include up to two years’ imprisonment, fines of 25,000 rupees (\$340), or both.

Under Andhra Pradesh and Telangana laws, authorities may prohibit proselytizing near places of worship. Punishment for violations may include imprisonment for up to three years and fines up to 5,000 rupees (\$67). The laws in those states also ban the propagation or practice of any non-Hindu religion in localities designated as “temple towns” because of the number of significant Hindu temples located in those areas.

The federal penal code criminalizes “promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion” and “acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony,” including acts causing injury or harm to religious groups and their members. The penal code also prohibits “deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.” Violations of any of these provisions are punishable by imprisonment for up to three years, a fine, or both. If the offense is committed at a place of worship, imprisonment may be for up to five years.

There are no requirements for registration of religious groups unless they receive foreign funding, in which case they must register under the FCRA. Federal law requires NGOs, including religious organizations, registered under the FCRA to maintain audit reports on their accounts and a schedule of their activities and to provide these to state government officials upon request.

Organizations conducting “cultural, economic, educational, religious, or social programs” that receive foreign funding are required to obtain a license under the FCRA. The central government may also require that licensed organizations obtain prior permission before accepting or transferring foreign funds. The central government may reject a license application or a request to transfer funds if it

judges the recipient to be acting against “harmony between religious, racial, social, linguistic, regional groups, castes, or communities.”

NGOs, including religious organizations, may use 20 percent of their funding for administrative purposes and are prohibited from transferring foreign funds to any other organization or individual.

The constitution states that any legal reference to Hindus is to be construed to include followers of Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism, meaning they are subject to laws regarding Hindus, such as the Hindu Marriage Act. Subsequent legislation continues to use the word Hindu as a category that includes Sikhs, Buddhists, Baha’is, and Jains, but it identifies the groups as separate religions whose followers are included under the legislation.

Federal law provides official minority status to six religious groups: Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, and Buddhists. State governments may grant minority status under state law to religious groups that are minorities in a particular region. Members of recognized minority groups are eligible for government assistance programs. The constitution states that the government is responsible for protecting religious minorities and enabling them to preserve their culture and religious interests.

Personal status laws establish civil codes for members of certain religious communities in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance based on religion, faith, and culture. Hindu, Christian, Parsi, Jewish, and Islamic personal status laws are legally recognized and judicially enforceable. Personal status issues that are not defined for a community in a separate law are covered under Hindu personal status laws. These laws, however, do not supersede national and state legislation or constitutional provisions. The government grants autonomy to the All India Muslim Personal Law Board and the Parsi community to define their customary practices. If law boards or community leaders are not able to resolve disputes, cases are referred to the civil courts.

Interfaith couples and all couples marrying in a civil ceremony are generally required to provide public notice 30 days in advance – including addresses, photographs, and religious affiliation – for public comment, although this requirement varies across states. Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, or Jains who marry outside their religions face the possibility of losing their property inheritance rights under those communities’ personal status laws.

The law recognizes the registration of Sikh marriages but does not include divorce provisions for Sikhs. Other Sikh personal status matters fall under Hindu codes. Under the law, any person, irrespective of religion, may seek a divorce in civil court.

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in government schools; the law permits private religious schools. The law permits some Muslim, Christian, Sindhi (Hindu refugees), Parsi, and Sikh educational institutions that receive government support to set quotas for students belonging to the religious minority in question. For example, Aligarh Muslim University must admit at least 50 percent Muslims. St. Stephen's College in Delhi and St. Xavier's in Mumbai must admit at least 50 percent Christians.

Twenty-five of the 28 states apply partial to full restrictions on bovine slaughter. Penalties vary among states and may vary based on whether the animal is a cow, calf, bull, or ox. The ban mostly affects Muslims and members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes that traditionally consume beef. In most of the states where bovine slaughter is banned, penalties include imprisonment for six months to two years and a fine of 1,000 to 10,000 rupees (\$13-\$130). Since August, when the Assam state government enacted new legislation, penalties have included minimum imprisonment of three years or a fine between 300,000 and 500,000 rupees (\$4,000-\$6,700) or both, without being eligible for bail prior to trial, for slaughtering, consuming, or transporting cattle. Since February, the slaughter of all cattle, except for buffalo older than age 13, has been illegal in Karnataka, with violators subject to imprisonment of between three and seven years and penalties between 500,000 and 1,000,000 rupees (\$6,700-\$13,500). Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir penalize cow slaughter with imprisonment of two to 10 years. Gujarat state law mandates a minimum 10-year sentence and a maximum sentence of life imprisonment for killing cows, selling beef, and illegally transporting cows or beef.

One state, Madhya Pradesh, imposes fines of 25,000 to 50,000 rupees (\$340-\$670) and prison sentences of six months to three years for "cow vigilantism," i.e., committing violence in the name of protecting cows. This is the only law of its kind in the country.

The National Commission for Minorities, which includes representatives from the six designated religious minorities and the National Human Rights Commission, investigates allegations of religious discrimination. The Ministry of Minority Affairs may also conduct investigations. These agencies have no enforcement



powers but conduct investigations based on written complaints of criminal or civil violations and submit findings to law enforcement agencies. Eighteen of the country's 28 states and the National Capital Territory of Delhi have state minorities commissions, which also investigate allegations of religious discrimination.

The constitution establishes the legal basis for preferential public benefit programs for Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe communities and members of the "Other Backward Classes," a category for groups deemed to be socially and educationally disadvantaged. The constitution specifies only Hindus, Sikhs, or Buddhists are eligible to be deemed members of a Scheduled Caste. As a result, Christians and Muslims qualify for benefits if deemed to be members of "backward" classes due to their social and economic status.

The government requires foreign missionaries to obtain a missionary visa.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

### **Government Practices**

On September 26, a 14-year-old Christian boy in the Gaya District of Bihar died at a hospital in Patna after perpetrators threw acid on him, according to media reports. The family members said police did not register a complaint despite threats to the family by Hindu groups and local individuals. The boy's father, Vakil Ravidas, had adopted Christianity with his family five years earlier and, according to family members, local community members threatened and warned them against attending church. Police told media the boy died by self-immolation due to a familial dispute, a claim the victim's family denied. Media reported the family signed a consent letter declaring they did not want to pursue the matter with police or the courts.

According to media reports, two Muslim men from Jamshedpur in Jharkhand stated that during an interrogation on August 26 police used anti-Muslim slurs, forced them to strip naked at a city police station, and pressured them to have sexual intercourse with each other. When they refused, they said they were "beaten and threatened to be sent to Afghanistan." Police released them the same day. The men said they were called to the police station for questioning in connection with an alleged kidnapping case involving a Muslim man and a Hindu woman who had eloped. They said seven police personnel, including the station officer in charge, sexually abused them. The officer in charge denied the

allegation. On August 27, the two men — Mohammad Arzoo and Mohammad Aurangzeb — filed a complaint with Jamshedpur police that they were tortured by seven police personnel. According to a media report, no action was taken against the accused police officers by year's end.

The government did not release data on communal violence during the year. Government data from 2020 reported a large increase in communal violence compared to 2019, largely due to the February 2020 violence and protests following passage of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). The CAA provides an expedited path to citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain, Parsi, and Christian migrants from Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh who had entered the country on or before December 31, 2014. Similarly situated Muslims, Jews, members of other faiths, and atheists from these three countries were not included. The government argued the law was necessary to provide protections for religious minorities from those countries.

The National Crimes Record Bureau reported 857 instances of communal violence in 2020 compared to 438 in 2019. According to both media and the *Crime in India for 2020* report, released in September, police arrested 1818 individuals throughout 2020 for the protests in Northeast Delhi. The report said that 53 persons including two security personnel were killed in the protests, and 581 individuals, including 108 police personnel, were injured. Of those killed, 35 were Muslim and 18 Hindu. Of those arrested, 956 were Muslim and 868 Hindu. By the end of the year, 1204 individuals remained in jail, 544 individuals had been released on bail, various courts in Delhi were processing 250 outstanding criminal complaints, and Delhi police were investigating an additional 350 criminal complaints related to the riots. Those numbers continued to fluctuate due to the ongoing hearings. The first conviction was a Hindu male in December for setting a Muslim resident's house on fire as part of a mob.

The *Crime in India for 2020* report said the riots resulted from the Muslim community's "feeling of discrimination" due to the NRC and the CAA, and certain groups with "vested interests capitalized on this feeling and further aroused the sentiments of this community against the central government." The Assam State government published its NRC in 2018 to define citizenship, and any Assamese resident who did not appear on the list would need to go before the Foreigners' Tribunal, a quasi-judicial body, which would declare them a foreigner or citizen. An estimated one-third of Assam's 33 million residents are Muslim. The Muslim community and media expressed concern that the NRC, a proposed list of all citizens being implemented only in the state of Assam, coupled with the national

CAA, could result in Muslims being determined to be “illegal immigrants” and detained or deported. None had been deported by the end of the year.

Opposition parties and civil society members continued to criticize the probe into the riot cases and accused Delhi police of targeting minorities, a charge Delhi police and the national Home Ministry (responsible for police oversight) denied. In a press conference on September 13, several prominent civil society members and activists said Delhi police were responsible for “derailing” the probe and demanded release of individuals arrested for the rioting or protesting against the CAA. Various courts also criticized the Delhi police for inadequate investigation of the riots, which Muslim academics, human rights activists, former police officers, and journalists said reflected police anti-Muslim bias, while deflecting the investigation away from those responsible. A lower court in Delhi imposed a fine of 25,000 rupees (\$340) on the Delhi police for “callous” investigation into the case of one man who said police shot him in the eye during the riots. The judge said the police had “miserably failed” their duty in that case. The Delhi High Court stayed the fine but upheld the lower court judge’s criticism of the riot investigation. Critical court rulings led to the Delhi police setting up a Special Investigation Cell to monitor progress of the Delhi riots investigation.

During the year, Delhi courts released some of those arrested during the 2020 riots. In July, for example, a court dropped charges against a Hindu man who was held for over a year in pretrial custody after being accused of joining a mob that burned and looted a shop the mob thought was Muslim-owned, according to media reports.

The case against activist and former Jawaharlal Nehru University student Umar Khalid, a Muslim, who told a court in 2020 he had spent time in solitary confinement after being arrested during the riots, remained ongoing at year’s end and he remained in custody. Media reported that during a bail hearing, Khalid’s lawyer argued the police officer who originally filed charges against his client had been influenced by the communal tension during the riots and the charges were fabricated. In September, prominent civil society groups demanded Khalid’s release, describing him a “defender of human rights” and a “peace activist.”

By year’s end, the government had not enacted rules to implement the CAA, and the Supreme Court had not heard any of the more than 100 legal challenges to the act.

Christians and Muslims were charged during the year under laws restricting conversions, and some state governments announced plans to strengthen existing legislation or develop new legislation.

Media reported Madhya Pradesh police filed 21 cases against 47 individuals and arrested 15 Muslims and six Christians between March and June for violations of the state's law restricting conversions. In 15 of the 21 cases, rape and molestation charges were added.

On March 8, a law went into effect in Madhya Pradesh that increased the penalties for forced religious conversion through marriage or any other fraudulent means. The law requires prior notice to a district official, to which any person may object, to convert to the spouse's faith. The law also permits the annulment of a fraudulent marriage and increases the penalty for violators from a two-year prison term with bail possible to a term of up to 10 years without bail and fines that can exceed 100,000 rupees (\$1,300). Legal expert Sanjay Hegde said the state laws against conversion let the mobs have the final say. "If you are born in a religion, you can't change your religion, without the State's consent," said Hegde. "These laws try to control women, rather than marriage, and assume that the women don't have any agency of their own," Hegde added.

According to the Christian NGO International Christian Concern (ICC), on January 11, Azad Prem Singh, a leader of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad Hindu nationalist group, sent a memorandum to the Jhabua District administrative head in Madhya Pradesh demanding a ban of all churches in tribal areas. Singh said Christians were fraudulently mass converting individuals to Christianity. "In the past 70 years, Christian missionaries have converted gullible indigenous people to Christianity and built churches specifically on protected tribal land," Singh said. "All the illegally built churches should be shut down immediately and action should be taken against all priests and pastors involved in the process." In the memorandum, Singh gave the local government 30 days to meet his demands and threatened to use violence if they were not met. The state government did not agree to Singh's demand to ban all churches in tribal areas. The police continued to arrest Christians on charges of forced or induced conversion in the region, according to Christian community members. On December 25, police arrested three persons, including a Catholic priest and a Protestant pastor, at Bicholi village in Jhabua District for allegedly luring tribal villagers into Christianity by offering free education and treatment in missionary-run schools and the hospital, media reported. In September, the Christian community in Jhabua wrote to the district authorities and President Ram Nath Kovind complaining of attacks and false

accusations by the various Hindu nationalist affiliates of the BJP and the Hindu nationalist organization RSS.

In Uttar Pradesh, between November 2020 and November 2021, police filed 148 cases against 359 persons for violating laws restricting conversion. According to state police records, the police completed investigations in 113 cases and filed charges in 90, but media reported that no case had been decided by the courts in Uttar Pradesh by year's end. Media reported that 72 of the 359 had charges dropped against them for lack of evidence. According to a faith-based NGO, between June and September, at least 71 Christian leaders were arrested in Uttar Pradesh after Hindu nationalists accused them of carrying out illegal conversions.

In June, the Uttar Pradesh Anti-Terrorism Squad (ATS) arrested Muslim clerics Mohammad Umar Gautam and Mufti Qazi Jahagir Alam Qasmi for performing illegal conversions. Police told media the two had been running a "huge conversion racket." The ATS later arrested eight more individuals whom police said were performing conversions at the Islamic Dawah Centre by offering "education, marriage, and jobs" to poor people. According to media reports, eight of those arrested, including the two clerics, were charged in September with "illegal conversions" and "waging war against India."

On October 7, the Uttar Pradesh ATS arrested a Muslim man in connection with his activities as a member of a WhatsApp group that encouraged individuals to convert to Islam. ATS told media that the man had been involved in illegal conversion activities since 2016 and that he and others "spread religious hatred" by inducing people to convert to Islam.

On October 10, seven Protestant pastors in Mau District in Uttar Pradesh were taken into judicial custody pending a police investigation after being arrested on charges of unlawful religious conversions.

In March, Uttar Pradesh police detained two nuns and two postulants from the Sacred Heart convent of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala after Hindu activists riding with them on a passenger train said the nuns were forcibly converting the postulants to Christianity, according to media reports. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India's (EFI) report covering January-June, police immediately arrested the four and took them to the local police station followed by a crowd of 150 "religious radicals." The police released the four after five hours of questioning and did not press charges. In a statement, the Church said the four continued their journey with police protection.

In January, according to the EFI report, police in Malkangiri District of Odisha arrested Raja Kartami for violating the state's conversion restriction laws following a complaint from his Hindu in-laws that he was forcing his wife to become a Christian. As of year's end, Kartami was in jail awaiting trial.

In August, Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Khattar announced that the state would consider drafting legislation to stop forced religious conversions in response to incidents of "love jihad" (a derogatory term referring to Muslim men seeking to marry women from other faiths to convert them to Islam). Such legislation had not been introduced by year's end.

On September 21, Karnataka Home Minister Araga Jnanendra announced that his government would propose legislation to prevent forced religious conversions in the state. Following this announcement, a delegation of Karnataka-based Catholic bishops, led by Archbishop of Bengaluru Peter Machado, met with state Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai to discuss the proposed legislation. The delegation expressed concern, should the legislation become law, about the potential misuse of the law to falsely accuse the Christian community of engaging in forced conversions. On December 23, the Karnataka State Legislative Assembly passed the "anti-unlawful conversion bill," which would prohibit forced religious conversion in the state. At year's end, the bill was pending approval by the State Legislative Council.

In October, the Uttarakhand government stated it intended to amend existing law and empower police to register cases based on allegations of forced religious conversion. The existing state law requires such allegations to be handled directly by the courts. Madan Kaushik, the BJP's president in Uttarakhand, told media in October that "Our party's line is clear that no conversion will be tolerated." A civil rights attorney in the state expressed concern that such a change in the law could lead to abuse. She said, "A citizen is somewhat protected if the court hears the complaint and proceeds with the matter. However, if the state police are given the power to register FIRs [in forced conversion cases], there is no protection from misuse."

In February, the Supreme Court declined to hear petitions from NGOs and activists challenging the constitutionality of the conversion restriction laws in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand, deferring the challenges first to the respective state high courts.

On June 21, Gujarat police arrested a Muslim man for forcibly marrying a Hindu woman. Police said the man was in violation of the state's freedom of religion law, which had been amended in April to increase penalties for forced marriages. According to media reports, after the victim's mother filed a missing person complaint, Gujarat police opened an investigation and determined that the man, who was already married, kidnapped the woman and forced her to marry him. Media also reported that the woman said the man raped her and threatened to harm her family if she did not marry. The Muslim man was charged with kidnapping, rape, and criminal intimidation. Investigation on the case continued at the end of the year.

On April 1, Gujarat government amended legislation enacted in 2003 on freedom of religion to explicitly prohibit the use of fraudulent marriage to convert partners of different religions. The law's preamble stated the amendment aimed to reduce the "emerging trend" of coerced religious conversion of women. On August 19, the Gujarat High Court suspended seven provisions of the state's amended freedom of religion law, stating an interfaith marriage by itself cannot be treated as a forceful or "unlawful conversion by deceit or allurement." On August 26, the state government asked that the suspension of those provisions be annulled; the High Court rejected the request. On December 14, the Gujarat government challenged the stay in the Supreme Court; there was no ruling by the end of the year.

On October 13, the Gujarat High Court granted bail to all seven individuals arrested in the state's first case under the amended freedom of religion law. The case involved a Hindu woman who filed forced conversion charges against her Muslim husband, five of his Muslim family members, and the officiant at their wedding; all of whom were arrested on June 18. On August 5, the woman filed a petition in the Gujarat High Court to retract her complaint, stating the police had "twisted" her complaint into a case of forced religious conversion, rape, and other charges. According to the police report, her Muslim husband had claimed to be Christian before their wedding and, once they were married, the family pressured the wife to convert to Islam. Police dropped the case after the woman retracted her complaint.

In September, media reported the MHA had suspended the FCRA licenses of six NGOs, including two Christian evangelical groups and one Islamic charity in Kerala, citing FCRA violations. In December, the MHA stated that FCRA licenses of 5,789 NGOs had lapsed because they did not apply for renewal in time. Media reported that hundreds of these NGOs were faith-based. The MHA also stated that it had denied FCRA renewal to 179 NGOs during the year, including Mother

Teresa's Missionaries of Charity. The MHA reversed the denial several weeks later. The original MHA announcement of the action cited unnamed "adverse inputs" against the NGO. Some media reports noted that the government decision came days after police filed a complaint against the director of a children's home run by the Missionaries of Charity in Gujarat state for attempting to convert young girls to Christianity although the Ministry of Home Affairs did not attribute a linkage between the two events.

NGOs, including faith-based organizations, continued to criticize the requirements of the FCRA as constraining civil society and religious organizations. Opponents of the FCRA amendments called the requirements onerous and a barrier to organizations continuing to work in the country. The government continued to say the FCRA law strengthened oversight and accountability of foreign NGO funding in the country.

In a July virtual session hosted by the U.S.-based nonprofit Indian American Muslim Council on Religious Freedom in India, Amnesty International USA said the organization was forced to halt all operations in the country in 2020 because of the FCRA requirements. The Amnesty representative said the FCRA requirements were one example of "the Indian government activating their overall governmental framework" to crush opportunities for upholding religious freedom.

In March, the MHA stated 22,678 NGOs had been granted registration under the FCRA during the last five years. The government also reported the registrations of 2,742 NGOs had been revoked from 2018 to 2020 for noncompliance, the most recent data available.

In its annual report, international NGO Human Rights Watch (HRW) said the government adopted laws and policies that discriminated against religious minorities, especially Muslims. HRW also said some BJP leaders vilified Muslims and police failed to act against some BJP supporters who committed violence, a combination that emboldened some Hindu nationalist groups to attack Muslims and government critics with impunity.

On January 4, police officials in Karnataka's Hassan District banned a Christian prayer service, according to media reports. A senior police officer asked the worshippers, who included 50 individuals from 15 families, to show proof they were Christians; he later accused them of having been converted to Christianity and misrepresenting their religion by claiming they had been Christian from birth.



Police did not charge the families and warned the worshippers against conducting prayer gatherings without permission.

According to ICC, police shut down a house church in Dharmapuri, Telangana on February 28 following a complaint from a local Hindu group, which had also disrupted the church service there. The NGO stated that the police invoked a 2007 Andhra Pradesh state law, later adopted by the state of Telangana, to close down the church because Dharmapuri is designated by the law as a “temple town.” The pastor told ICC he had been leading worship in his home for five years without problems. While the town of approximately 78,000 persons is overwhelmingly Hindu, there are more than 300 Christians and more than 2,000 Muslims living there.

On July 24, Tamil Nadu police arrested Father George Ponnaiah, a Catholic priest based in Nagercoil, south Tamil Nadu, for alleged hate speech against Hindu gods, the Prime Minister, the Home Minister, and the state government in Tamil Nadu. Ponnaiah was in custody for 16 days. At year’s end, Ponnaiah was released on bail, awaiting trial. If convicted, he could face a prison term up to five years. Archbishop of Madurai Antony Pappusamy publicly criticized Ponnaiah for his statements.

On January 1, police in Indore, Madhya Pradesh, arrested stand-up comedian Munawar Faruqi and five associates after Eklavya Gaur, the son of state Member of Legislative Assembly Malini Gaur and the head of a local Hindu nationalist group, filed a police complaint stating he overheard the comedian and his associates using religiously offensive language during rehearsal. On February 6, Indore prison authorities released Faruqi after the Supreme Court granted him bail. The Madhya Pradesh High Court later granted bail to Faruqi’s five associates.

On January 14, Andhra Pradesh police arrested nondenominational Christian pastor Praveen Chakravarthi for “disturbing communal harmony” after one of his videos from 2013 circulated on social media. In the video, in a conversation with the head of a U.S.-based NGO, Chakravarthi discussed his evangelism in the country. After his arrest, Chakravarthi’s bank accounts were frozen. He was later released on bail, and no further action was reported by the end of the year.

On August 19, Hyderabad police arrested Pastor Honey Johnson from Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh on the charge of making derogatory remarks against Hinduism and Hindu deities on his YouTube channel. Members of his

church held protests in Visakhapatnam demanding his release, and he was subsequently released on bail.

On July 20, the Supreme Court expressed concern about the Kerala government's relaxation of COVID-19 restrictions during Eid al-Adha celebrations July 18-20. In a ruling, the court said it could not block the state government's actions after the fact, but it said, "The Kerala government failed to protect the fundamental rights of life and health of the people." The court said it would take action against the Kerala government if the loosened restrictions led to additional spread of COVID-19, but it took no further action on this issue by year's end. Earlier in July, the Supreme Court had cancelled the annual Hindu Kanwar Yatra festival in Uttar Pradesh due to a surge in COVID-19 cases there. In April, activists had asked the government to cancel the Hindu Kumbh Mela festival for COVID-19 reasons, but the government declined to do so. Also in April, the Supreme Court approved the petition of Muslim leaders to open the Nizamuddin Mosque in New Delhi for Ramadan services. Advocates for the mosque cited the Kumbh Mela celebrations in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, which were permitted, as well as at the Hindu temple dedicated to Hanuman in Karol Bagh, Delhi, which remained open despite COVID-19 restrictions, to support their request to reopen.

In June and July, residents of the predominantly Muslim Union Territory of Lakshadweep protested reforms proposed by Administrator Praful Khoda Patel in December 2020. The reforms included banning cow slaughter and beef sales on the islands, removing beef and meat (except fish and eggs) from meals in schools, closing government-run dairy farms, permitting liquor sales, imposing a law allowing preventive detention, and disqualifying residents with more than two children from running in local elections. Media reported the local residents considered the proposed reforms as anti-Muslim, and primarily affected Muslim families. Protesters said Patel had been trying to transform the island culturally and demographically. The Lakshadweep administration said the reforms were necessary to develop Lakshadweep as a global tourist destination like the Maldives.

NGOs, including faith-based organizations, continued to criticize the requirements of the FCRA as constraining civil society and religious organizations. According to the Ministry of Home Affairs, 5,789 NGOs lost their FCRA licenses because they did not file for their renewal. Some opposition political parties and faith-based NGOs described the regulations as "onerous" and difficult to comply with, making registration and renewal difficult. The government continued to say the

FCRA law strengthened oversight and accountability of foreign NGO funding in the country.

In October, media reported Hindu protesters in Haryana said Muslims had been using public property to conduct daily prayers for four weeks without authorization from local authorities. The Muslim worshippers, who numbered 200 according to the media, had been praying outside in an area not designated for prayer. The protestors said they would continue to “protest peacefully” until the police took action. Haryana Chief Minister Khattar stated prayer in public spaces would be prohibited. Muslim groups representing the worshippers stated they were offering prayers at places designated by Haryana government officials. On December 16, Muslim former MP Mohammed Adeb filed a petition in the Supreme Court seeking action against Haryana government officials for not following directions to allow Muslims to offer prayers at designated public spaces. The Supreme Court had not ruled on the matter at year’s end.

The government closed the 600-year-old Jamia Mosque, which serves the largest Muslim congregation in Jammu and Kashmir, for 45 of the 52 Fridays during the year. According to media reports, the chief imam of Jamia Mosque remained in home detention during closure of the mosque. Some other mosques in the region closed by the government in August 2019 when it abrogated Article 370 (state status) in Jammu and Kashmir were allowed to reopen during the year. Since 2019, the government has continued to close mosques in the area periodically, sometimes for long intervals.

In May, authorities in Uttar Pradesh bulldozed a 100-year-old mosque in Barabanki on the grounds that it was an illegal structure. The destruction followed a March 15 order from the state government to cease worship in the mosque so it could be demolished. The government also said it blocked traffic. Muslim leaders said the destruction violated a court order suspending destruction of all “illegal” structures until the end of May and said they would take the case to the Supreme Court. The government then tried to block access to the mosque by building a wall, which according to media led to public protests in which activist Syed Farooq Ahmad stated at least 30 persons were arrested and others were beaten. Two days after authorities demolished the mosque, the Sunni Waqf Board of Uttar Pradesh filed a petition in the Allahabad High Court demanding the government reconstruct the mosque. The court had not ruled on the matter at the end of the year.

On September 6, opposition legislative assembly members from the BJP in Jharkhand protested the state government decision to offer a room in the state

assembly building for Muslims to pray. Media reported that BJP legislators loudly disrupted the assembly session that day with Hindu chants and instruments, calling for the prayer room decision to be rescinded or a separate Hindu prayer room also be designated in the building. In a media interview, BJP national vice-president Raghubar Das said that the [Muslim] members of the state assembly from the Jharkhand government “openly support the Taliban. A separate *Namaz Hallim* [Muslim prayer room] in the Jharkhand Legislative Assembly is a result of this ideology. Otherwise, any person who believes in Indian democracy would not do such an act.”

In January, two residents of Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, filed a petition in the Allahabad High Court challenging the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) court’s September 2020 acquittal of all 32 persons, including BJP politicians, charged in the 1992 demolition of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.

In May, the Assam government implemented the 2020 Assam Repealing Bill, which abolished the 1995 Assam Madrassa Education (Provincialization) Act and 2018 Assam Madrassa Education (Provincialization of Services of Employees and Re-Organization of Madrassa Educational Institutions) Act. Implementation of the act resulted in removal of the theological content from the curriculum at 700 state-run madrassahs and converted them into regular public schools. Theological content was also removed from the state-run Sanskrit schools, but analysts indicated that madrassahs were impacted in greater numbers. Privately-run madrassahs and Sanskrit schools were not impacted by the state government measure.

On October 19, 2020, the Allahabad High Court in Uttar Pradesh ruled that the state’s Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act “was being misused against innocent persons” and granted bail to a Muslim arrested under the act. Uttar Pradesh police had filed charges in 1,716 cases of cow slaughter and made more than 4,000 arrests under the act as of August. According to Uttar Pradesh State government data, the National Security Act (NSA) was also invoked in some cow slaughter cases; observers said this was to make the charges more serious. Persons detained under the NSA could be held up to 12 months without formal charges. A media investigation revealed that between January 2018 and December 2020, the Allahabad High Court had annulled detention orders and freed those arrested under the NSA in 94 of 120 cases it heard under the Prevention of Cow Slaughter Act in Uttar Pradesh.

Assam (in August) and Karnataka (in February) enacted legislation imposing strict penalties for killing cattle, bringing the total states with similar restrictions to 25 (of 28). Opposition members of the Assam legislative assembly, including from Muslim parties, protested that state's new legislation. Faith-based organizations said the law could negatively affect the large Christian and tribal populations in the state that consumed beef. Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma stated the law would promote harmony between Hindus and Muslims in the state, while some opposition party members said that it could stoke religious tensions, adversely affect livelihoods, and be detrimental to trade and food habits in the region. Media reported that the new law in Karnataka would give police in the state the power to search and seize property based only on suspicion of violation of the law.

In September, the Gau Sewa Commission, a Punjabi organization dedicated to the preservation and welfare of cows, submitted a petition to the Governor of Punjab demanding the death penalty be instituted for cow slaughter.

In October, the Madras High Court ruled that displays of a Christian cross and other religious symbols and practices could not be cited as reasons to revoke Scheduled Caste (SC) community certificates, which are used by members of designated lower castes in the Hindu hierarchy to obtain government benefits. The ruling was in response to an appeal by a Hindu medical doctor whose SC community certificate was revoked in 2013 because she married a Christian and the couple raised their children in the Christian faith. The court ordered the restoration of her SC community certificate in October.

In February, Pratap Simha, a BJP MP, called for denying benefits of government affirmative action programs to individuals who converted to Christianity. The MP made the remarks while attending a District Development Coordination and Monitoring Committee meeting on February 24. The Bengaluru-based Christian Political Leaders Forum protested the remarks.

On April 6, the Gujarat High Court blocked the arrest of a Parsi man accused by a Hindu neighbor of selling land to a Muslim in 2020 in violation of the Gujarat Disturbed Areas Act, which mandates that buyers and sellers of different religions obtain permission for property transactions in specific neighborhoods. The Hindu neighbor also said that the buyer concealed his religion and forged documents to evade provisions of the act. There was no update by the end of the year.

In September, the government of the Muslim-majority Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir launched a program to address the grievances of migrants from the

region, a majority of whom were Hindu. Under this program, migrants who were forcibly displaced from the Kashmir Valley in the 1990s could reclaim their properties in Kashmir. According to civil society reports, members of the Hindu Pandit caste may have sold land under duress and the central government measure was a means to address the displacement in the 1990s. In March, the national government informed the parliament that 44,167 Kashmiri migrant families, including 39,782 Hindu families, had registered with a government-appointed Relief Office, and 3,800 Kashmiri migrants had returned to the Kashmir Valley in the last six years to take up government jobs under a special program announced by the Prime Minister in 2015 for infrastructure development and economic prosperity in Jammu and Kashmir. According to media reports, mostly Hindus applied for those jobs. Since the state status of Jammu and Kashmir was revoked in August 2019, 520 migrants had returned and another 2000 migrant candidates were likely to return during the year and in 2022, the government stated.

On August 10, thousands of Dalit Christians and Muslims observed the 71st anniversary of a 1950 petition still pending before the Supreme Court to maintain Scheduled Caste benefits such as quotas in government jobs and education. The petition seeks to reverse a government order which limited such benefits to Hindu Dalits. A Dalit Christian lawyer, Franklin Caesar Thomas, who has been arguing the case in the Supreme Court for 16 years, told media that Dalit Christians and Muslims continued to face caste discrimination because of their adopted faiths since they were not formally recognized as Scheduled Castes. According to the National Council of Churches in India, approximately 70 percent of Christians in India belonged to Scheduled Castes before they converted. A seven-member panel of Supreme Court judges formed in 2020 to hear the petition had not ruled on the matter by the end of the year.

In April, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee (All India Trinamool Congress Party) made a public appeal to Muslims to vote for her party in West Bengal elections. Such a direct appeal from a sitting government official to voters from a particular religious group is prohibited in the constitution. The national Election Commission reprimanded her for violating the election code of conduct.

On December 24, Asaduddin Owaisi, an MP and president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), a predominantly Muslim political party, implied in remarks to parliament that Hindus would face consequences when Prime Minister Modi and Uttar Pradesh Yogi Adityanath, both BJP, left office. Police filed a FIR against Owaisi for communal hate speech. The leader later clarified

that he was speaking in the context of past police “atrocities against innocent Muslims” in Uttar Pradesh and was not making a threat.

In February, ahead of elections in Assam, state Health, Education, and Finance Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma (BJP) told media that his party did not need or want the votes of Bengali-origin Muslims because they were “openly challenging Assamese culture and language and the composite Indian culture.”

While addressing Church members on September 9, Catholic Bishop Mar Joseph Kalarangatt of the Syro-Malabar Church in Kerala said Muslims were using the practices of “love jihad and narcotics jihad” to “destroy” non-Muslims. Kalarangatt said, “In a democratic country like ours, jihadis have realized that they cannot destroy other communities by using arms. The jihadis are using other weapons which cannot be identified easily by others. In the perspective of jihadis, non-Muslims have to be annihilated. When the agenda is spreading religion and eradication of non-Muslims, the ways for attaining that agenda get manifested in different manners. The love jihad and narcotic jihad are two such ways.” According to media reports, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said his government would not take action against the bishop.

In February, the Maharashtra state government petitioned the Supreme Court to dismiss pleas seeking a national-level CBI inquiry into the April 2020 killing of three Hindu monks by a crowd in Palghar. The state government said it had already disciplined 18 police officials for their failure to control the crowd in that incident. On January 16, a local court granted bail to 89 of the 201 arrested in the case. The Supreme Court asked the Maharashtra government to submit a second charge sheet filed in the case by Maharashtra police but did not rule on the petition seeking a CBI investigation before year’s end. In the 2020 incident, a mob pulled the three monks from a police vehicle and killed them, alleging that they were child kidnappers.

Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath on September 12 publicly stated that earlier governments in Uttar Pradesh had favored Muslim constituents in benefits distribution.

In July, Mohan Bhagwat, the chief of the RSS, which is commonly considered to be the ideological parent to India’s ruling party BJP, publicly stated that Hindus and Muslims in India had the same DNA and should not be differentiated by religion. “There can never be any dominance of either Hindus or Muslims (in the country); there can only be the dominance of Indians,” Bhagwat said, adding that

members of the Muslim community should not be afraid that Islam is in danger in India. He also said that killing non-Hindus for cow slaughter was an act against Hinduism.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

On May 17, a Hindu group in the Mewat region of Haryana stopped the car in which Muslim Asif Khan was riding, verbally abused Khan and the other passengers, yelled “kill Muslims,” forced Khan to chant Hindu prayers and killed him when he tried to escape, according to media reporting. Police opened an investigation but made no arrests by the year’s end.

On June 20, media reported that a Hindu mob killed four Muslim men in the Khowai District of Tripura on suspicion of being cattle thieves. According to media, the men were killed when they were intercepted at Maharanijur transporting five cows in a truck. Police arrested three persons in connection with the killing and two others for spreading communal hatred on social media. There were no further developments in this case reported by year’s end.

On June 21, Muslim Aijaz Dar was beaten to death in Rajouri District of Jammu and Kashmir. He was returning home after buying a buffalo when suspected cow vigilantes attacked him with stones and sticks, according to media reports. Police arrested five suspects, but there were no further developments reported by year’s end.

According to media reports, on September 28, Muslim Arbaaz Aftab Mullah was decapitated in Khanapur village in the Belgavi District of Karnataka due to his relationship with a Hindu woman. Police arrested 10 individuals, including members of the Hindu organization Sri Rama Sene, described as radical, the woman’s parents, and the man hired to kill Mullah. There were no further developments by year’s end.

On April 3, police in Mangaluru, Karnataka arrested four Hindu activists and members of the Hindu nationalist group Bajrang Dal who were accused of stabbing to death a Muslim man traveling with a Hindu woman. The woman who filed the police complaint against the assailants stated the victim was her friend for many years and was accompanying her on a bus to a job interview when he was killed. She said the assailants stopped the bus, then attacked her and the other victim. After police made the arrests, local Bajrang Dal members reportedly defended the attack claiming that they wanted to save the woman from “falling prey to love



jihad.” One local Bajrang Dal leader told media, “Our responsibility is to rescue girls from our community.”

According to EFI, a group of Hindus killed Pastor Alok Rajhans in the Balangir District of Odisha on May 20. Police opened a case and arrested two suspects, but they were released shortly thereafter, according to Irish NGO Church in Chains.

On May 20, according to ICC, a group of Hindu nationalists attacked the family of Pastor Ramesh Bumbariya at his home in the Bansawra District in Rajasthan, killing the pastor’s father and beating the pastor and other family members when they refused to renounce their Christian faith. The police arrested seven persons for the killing and the investigation continued at year’s end, according to Church in Chains.

Terrorist groups Lashkar-e-Taiyaaba and Hizbul Mujahideen killed several civilians and migrant laborers belonging to the minority Hindu and Sikh communities in the Muslim-majority Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir during the year. In October, 11 civilians including two schoolteachers – Supinder Kour and Deepak Chand – were killed in targeted attacks. Kour, a Sikh, and Chand, a Hindu, were killed on October 7 after terrorists forcefully entered their school in Srinagar and identified them as belonging to minority communities. On October 5, local businessman Makhan Lal Bindroo, a member of the Hindu Pandit caste, was fatally shot at his pharmaceutical shop. According to media reports, the killings caused widespread fear among Hindus and Sikhs in the Kashmir valley, leading hundreds to depart Jammu and Kashmir.

On October 15, Sikh farm laborer Lakhbir Singh was killed, and his mutilated body tied to a barricade. In several videos released on social media, Nihang Sikhs claimed responsibility for the killing, saying Singh insulted the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. Police arrested four members of the Nihang Sikh community and charged them with murder.

On December 19, an unidentified man was reportedly beaten to death by a group of Sikhs at a gurudwara (temple) in Kapurthala, Punjab, on suspicion that he had insulted the Nishan Sahib, the Sikh flag. Police and Punjab Chief Minister Charanjit Singh Channi stated that there was no evidence that the victim had committed sacrilege. Police arrested gurudwara caretaker Amarjit Singh on charges of murder.

On September 23, two Muslim men in Mathura, Uttar Pradesh, were beaten for carrying meat in their vehicle. According to media reports, members of a cow-vigilante group attacked the two and posted video of the assault on social media. The attackers claimed the Muslim men were carrying beef in violation of the state's anti-cow slaughter law and the state government's order banning the sale and transport of any meat in Mathura. Police arrested the victims under the anti-cow slaughter law and violation of the meat ban order. None of the attackers were arrested. A Mathura council member said the two lacked the permit and refrigerator required to transport perishable goods such as meat. He also said the two men had been jailed. There was no further information available on the case by year's end.

In September, the BBC reported views from freelance journalists and political opposition members that the number of attacks against the country's Muslim community had increased in recent years as well as their views that the government often declined to condemn such attacks.

According to UCF, the number of violent attacks against Christians in the country rose to 486 during the year, from 279 in 2020. According to UCF, most of the incidents were reported in states ruled by the BJP and included attacks on pastors, disruptions of Christmas celebrations, and vandalism. A joint report entitled *Christians under Attack in India*, drafted by NGOs United Against Hate, the Association for Protection of Civil Rights, and the UCF, noted that more than 500 incidents of violence against Christians were reported to the UCF hotline during the year. The report stated that 333 of 486 incidents were recorded in Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, and Karnataka States. The report stated that only 34 FIRs were filed against the perpetrators through the year. At the end of the year, 19 cases were pending against Christians in nine states under the conversion restriction laws, although no Christian had been convicted in the country for illegal religious conversion during the year, according to the report.

In a December *New York Times* article, Hindu nationalist Dilip Chouhan, who was recorded on video breaking into a church in Madhya Pradesh with a gun strapped to his back, said that senior police officials told him authorities would not pursue charges against him. Instead, several local pastors were arrested on charges of illegal conversions. Chouhan said his organization has more than 5000 members. BJP youth leader Gaurave Tiwari said opposing forced conversion was an important issue for the party. In Chhattisgarh State, BJP youth conducted several anti-Christian marches. In September, a group of young BJP workers from the same chapter entered a Chhattisgarh police station, hurled shoes at two pastors and

beat them up, reportedly in front of police officers. Rahul Rao, an office holder in the BJP youth cell, was charged with assault by police and released on bail. The article also quoted a leaked letter from a top police official in Chhattisgarh ordering police to “keep a constant vigil on the activities of Christian missionaries.” Media reported the Chhattisgarh government transferred the senior police official from the station hours after the incident. The investigation continued at the end of the year.

On September 18, media reported police arrested Christian pastor Ravi Gupta from Bihar’s Supaul District was arrested for converting 30 Hindu families to Christianity in his native village. Members of Vishna Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist organization affiliated with the RSS, detained Gupta and handed him over to police. There were no further developments on this case reported by year’s end.

On September 21, according to media reports, a village council in Mangapat Sirsai in the West Singhbhum District of Jharkhand ostracized three tribal families who converted to Christianity. In the presence of local police officials, the council reportedly asked the families to convert back to the local tribal Sarna religion and subsequently barred them from free movement inside the village when they refused to do so. According to the district president, the council took the action to counter the influence of Christian missionaries, whom he said had been quite active in the area, luring tribe members with land and money to convert them.

On June 30, approximately 20 members of the Hindu organization Bajrang Dal allegedly attacked Pastor Hemant Meher in the Jajpur District of Odisha, according to a July 10 report from ICC. The report said the group filmed the incident and beat the pastor before handing him over to the police and saying he had been forcibly converting people to Christianity. According to ICC, police released Meher without charge, urging him to file a complaint against his assailants. ICC said Bajrang Dal members attacked Meher again on July 1, forcing him to flee the area.

In April, media reported that a Muslim man posed as a Hindu to marry a Hindu woman in the Fatehabad District of Haryana. The man allegedly revealed his religious identity seven years into the marriage and attempted to forcibly convert her to Islam. When his wife refused, he forced her and their child out of their home. She pressed the local police to take action. Initially they took no action, but later, according to media reports, police opened an investigation and promised to

take action against the police personnel who refused to register her original complaint. There was no further action reported on this case by year's end.

The Union of Catholic Asian News service and major international media reported that on January 26, approximately 100 Hindu activists attacked a prayer service at the Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra, a Catholic media center in Indore in Madhya Pradesh, accusing the center of conducting religious conversions. The pastor told media the assailants beat worshippers and yelled at them. He said when police arrived, they only jailed the pastors and other church elders for violating Madhya Pradesh's new law outlawing conversions. The pastor said he and eight other church leaders were jailed for two months before being released, and still faced charges. According to national media, police pressed trespassing charges against 15 persons and opened investigations into the incident. Their cases were pending in court at year's end.

On January 5, according to media sources, members of the Hindu nationalist group Bajrang Dal disrupted a Christian prayer meeting in Uttar Pradesh. The pastor told media the group beat them and forced them to chant Hindu prayers, threatening to kill them if they did not. The Hindus turned the pastor and four others over to police, who charged them with forced conversion, based on the comments of one of the Hindus. Police also seized copies of the Bible and musical equipment, according to media reports. On January 6, the pastor and eight others filed a police report. There were no further developments reported on the case during the year.

On January 6, a Christian group in Uttar Pradesh filed a complaint against members of VHP for disrupting a prayer meeting. The Christians said 20 VHP members, including one police officer, entered their meeting uninvited, beat some worshippers, and damaged the facility. Police charged five of the Christians with illegal conversion, according to media reports, but there were no further developments on this case reported by year's end.

Media reported that on August 29 a group of more than 100 individuals targeted a Christian pastor for alleged religious conversion in Polmi village in Kabirdham District of Chhattisgarh. The reports stated that the group physically abused the pastor and vandalized his residence during a prayer service. Police opened an investigation into the incident.

On October 3, according to Catholic news agency *Agenzia Fides*, there were 13 instances of violence and threats committed by Hindus against Christian communities in Uttarakhand, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya

Pradesh states, and in New Delhi. Drawing on reporting from EFI, *Agenzia Fides* said these incidents included disrupting worship services and prayer meetings and beating worshippers; police arresting pastors for forced conversion, based on complaints filed by Hindus; and Hindu groups vandalizing Christian places of worship.

In October, Giani Harpreet Singh, leader of the Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee, a Sikh religious organization, and head priest of the Sikh community, said that Christian missionaries were “running a campaign for forced conversions in border areas of Punjab.”

NGO Sabrang reported that in Uttarakhand on October 3, 200 local members of Hindu organizations Bajarang Dal, VHP, and the youth wing of the BJP disrupted a worship service in Roorkee, shouting Hindu slogans, beating worshippers, and ransacking their meeting room. According to media, police charged the assailants with rioting, vandalism, trespassing, and deliberately injuring others.

In September, Vellappally Natesan, a prominent Hindu Ezhava leader and patron of the Bharat Dharma Jana Sena political organization in Kerala, stated it was not the Muslim community but Christians who were at the forefront of conversions and “love jihad” in the country.

According to media, Hindu nationalist groups disrupted nine Christmas prayer meetings, six in Uttar Pradesh, two in Haryana, and one in Assam, vandalizing church property in some of the incidents. In Agra, Uttar Pradesh, the regional general secretary of Bajrang Dal told the media that Christian missionaries used the season to “allure children by making Santa Claus distribute gifts to them and attract them towards Christianity.”

The investigation continued into the September 2020 killing of Hindu woman Priya Soni. Soni was beheaded reportedly for refusing to convert to Islam after marrying Muslim Ajaz Ahmed in a civil ceremony, in Sonbhadra, Uttar Pradesh. Police arrested Ahmed and Shoaib Akhtar, also a Muslim, for the crime and they remained in custody at year’s end.

In June, the Sikh minority community in Jammu and Kashmir protested over allegations of the forced conversion of two Sikh women, who subsequently married Muslim men. A Sikh delegation met national Home Minister Amit Shah and requested passage of a conversion restriction law “similar to the one in Uttar Pradesh” in Jammu and Kashmir.

On August 6, according to *The Christian Post*, a Sikh family in Punjab attacked a Christian woman, her sister, and mother for their beliefs. The report said that the attackers choked one victim unconscious. Police opened an investigation, but there were no further developments by the end of the year.

On October 6, Sikh leaders in Punjab started a campaign in rural areas to counter the potential conversion of lower income Sikhs to Christianity. The head priest of the Punjab Sikh community said, “Christian missionaries have been running a campaign in the border belt for forced conversions over the past few years. Innocent people are being cheated or lured to convert. We have received many such reports.” He also called forced conversions [to Christianity] “a dangerous attack on the Sikh religion.”

In its *Freedom in the World 2021* report, Freedom House downgraded the country from free to partly free due to “rising violence and discriminatory policies affecting the Muslim population” and crackdowns on dissent.

A Pew Research study “*Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation*,” released in July and based on interviews conducted in 2019 and 2020, found that 84 percent of those surveyed across different faiths said that “respecting all religions was very important to truly being Indian”; 80 percent said that “respecting other religions was very important to their religious identity”; and 91 percent said they were “very free to practice their own religion.” These numbers ranged from highs of 93 percent of Buddhists and 91 percent of Hindus, and lows of 82 percent of Sikhs and 85 percent of Jains saying they are very free to practice their religion, with Christians and Muslims at 89 percent. The survey also showed, however, that 83 percent of all respondents believed communal violence between religious groups was “a problem” for the country. The study’s overview stated that Indians’ commitment to tolerance was accompanied by a strong preference for keeping religious communities segregated, which was true even for religious minority communities. Large majorities of those surveyed said they did not have much in common with members of other religious groups, and large majorities in the six major religious groups said their close friends came mainly or entirely from their own religious community. Nearly two-thirds of Hindus (64 percent) said it was very important to be Hindu to be truly Indian. According to the report, Hindus who strongly link Hindu and Indian identities were more likely to also support religious segregation.

In its report covering the year, Christian NGO Open Doors said that overall violence against Christians and pressure against Christians “in all spheres of life” remained “very high.” The NGO said the persecution of Christians had intensified as Hindu nationalists “aim to cleanse the country of their presence and influence.” This led to the targeting of Christians and other religious minorities, including the use of social media to spread disinformation and stir up hatred.

On December 17-19, during a gathering in Haridwar, Uttarakhand, several Hindu leaders and activists called publicly for violence against religious minorities. Yati Narasinghanand, characterized as a Hindu extremist, announced a reward of 10 million rupees (\$135,000) for any Hindu leader who would lead a militant movement against Islam and Christianity. Narasinghanand also called upon Hindus to “take up weapons” against Muslims and wage a war against “Islamic jihad” for the protection of Hindus. Another Hindu religious leader, Sadhvi Annapurna, called for creation of a nation exclusively for Hindus and for raising an army against Muslims. Uttarakhand police subsequently booked seven persons including Narasinghanand and Annapurna, on multiple charges under the criminal code, including promoting enmity between religious groups, deliberately intending to outrage religious feeling by insulting religious groups, and acting prejudicial to social harmony. The spokesperson for the Uttarakhand government and director general of police condemned the statements and said that police would “take required action” against those responsible. On December 26, a group of attorneys, including a former judge on the Patna High Court, wrote the Supreme Court urging action in the case, and stating that the speeches made at the event in Haridwar were not merely hate speeches but “an open call for the murder of an entire community” which not only posed “a grave threat to the unity of the country, but also endangered the lives of millions of Muslim citizens.”

According to media reports, on October 1, Hindu nationalists held a rally in the Surguja District of Chhattisgarh to protest a perceived spike in forced conversion of Hindus to Christianity in the area. Media reported that World Hindu Congress leader Swami Parmatmanand attended the protest and called for those who engage in forced conversions to be beheaded. Police took no action against him, according to the Chhattisgarh-based Christian community.

On August 8, a video was widely circulated on social media of a group shouting threats to kill Muslims and demanding that Muslims convert to Hinduism to remain in the country. The incident took place during a demonstration near parliament in New Delhi in which the crowd was protesting colonial-era laws still in force, according to media reports. MP Asaduddin Owaisi, a Muslim, stated in

parliament that “genocidal slogans” were used against Muslims during the incident. Media reported that several prominent Hindu activists took part. Police officials told the media they were viewing video to identify suspects and had filed an FIR against “unknown persons” for shouting the threats.

On June 29, Hindu religious leader Mahamandaleshwar Yatindra Nath Giri in New Delhi stated that parliament should adopt a new constitution banning madrassahs, declaring religious conversion a crime, and punishing couples that have more than two children.

On October 15, Muslim cleric Abbas Siddiqui said persons who insulted the Quran should be “beheaded.” Siddiqui’s comments were aired in a video shown by media.

Media and one NGO reported that on October 20, Hindu groups affiliated with the RSS, Hindu Jagran Manch, and the VHP attacked and vandalized at least six mosques and more than a dozen shops and houses belonging to Muslim communities across Tripura State, reportedly in retaliation for attacks on minority Hindus in Bangladesh during the Durga Puja festival there. The NGO Centre for Study of Society and Secularism reported that attackers damaged 11 mosques, six shops, and two homes. The NGO also said that the authorities took stronger action against the journalists and activists who were reporting the violations than on the rioters themselves. The government rejected this claim and stated that action was taken against journalists for their “inflammatory social media posts” about the event. Tripura police registered a case against Ranu Das, a leader from the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (the youth wing of the BJP) who allegedly threw stones at a mosque and burned Muslim properties, for provocation to cause riot, intent to hurt religious feelings, and causing public enmity. The suspect fled and had not been arrested by year’s end.

According to media reports, on October 2, unidentified individuals vandalized a Hindu temple in the Anantnag District of Jammu and Kashmir. Police opened an investigation into the incident.

EFI said that on January 20, members of the Bajrang Dal demolished the boundary wall of a church in the Mahabubabad District of Telangana, saying the church building was too close to a Hindu temple.



According to Pastor Upajukta Singh, in June Hindu villagers destroyed the homes of eight Christian families, expelling them from Ratagaya village. The victims filed a police complaint.

In May, Hindu Jatav Dalit community villagers of the Muslim-majority Noorpur village in Aligarh District of Uttar Pradesh stated to media that Muslims were harassing them and discriminating against them. The villagers also said Muslims stopped a marriage procession from passing in front of a mosque in the village.

#### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement**

During the year, embassy and consulate officials met with government officials to discuss religious freedom and emphasize the importance of interfaith dialogue. Embassy officials, including the Chargés d’Affaires, also engaged with members of parliament and politicians across diverse political ideologies on the importance of religious freedom and the responsibility of democracies to ensure the rights of religious minorities.

Embassy and consulate officials met with leaders from religious minorities, NGOs, civil society members, academics, and interfaith leaders to discuss the perspectives about the status and experiences of religious minorities.

On October 1, the Consul General in Chennai joined Kerala Governor Arif Mohammed Khan at the Sri Vishnu Mohan Foundation’s annual Peace and Reconciliation Conference. Speaking to a gathering of religious and civil social leaders, government officials and academics, the Consul General emphasized the importance of respecting religious freedom and interfaith dialogue.

On May 7, the consulate general in Hyderabad hosted a virtual panel discussion during Ramadan that highlighted interfaith and cross-cultural experiences during the holiday period.

Throughout the year, the Chargés d’Affaires engaged with members of religious communities, including representatives of the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh faiths. In May, the Chargés d’Affaires organized a virtual interfaith dialogue during Ramadan in which he emphasized the importance of religious freedom. Members of academia, media commentators on interfaith issues, NGO interfaith activists, and representatives of multiple faiths participated.

In July, the Secretary of State met with several leaders from the Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Buddhist, Christian, Baha'i, and other faiths. He highlighted the value of the country's diversity and religious pluralism and the importance of protecting it. The Secretary addressed the importance of freedom of religion and belief in his public opening remarks and listened to the views and concerns of the religious minority and civil society leaders.