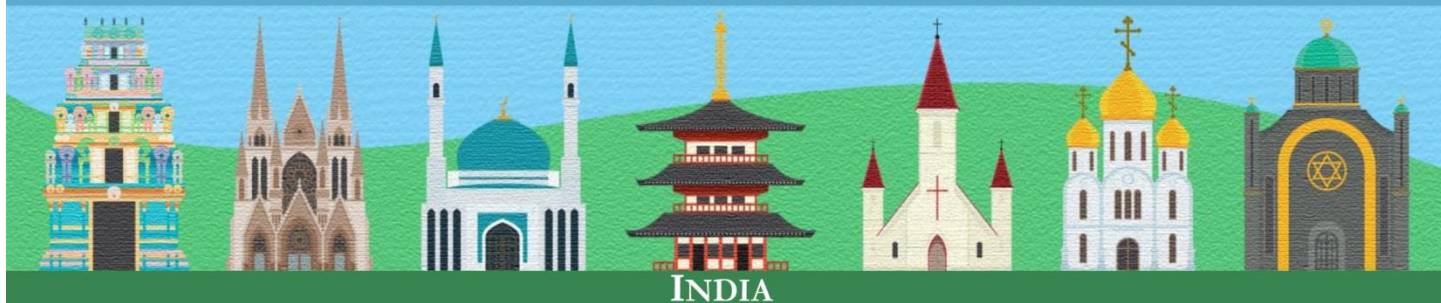


INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM



USCCB Fact Sheet

2015

INDIA- SECULARISM UNDER SIEGE

India is a land where different faiths have long thrived. Not only is it the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, but it is believed that Thomas the Apostle introduced Christianity to the subcontinent in the first century AD. Islam came to India in the 7th century and expanded under the Mughal Empire. India now has the third largest population of Muslims in the world. Given this history, it is no wonder that the 1950 Indian Constitution declared the country to be a secular republic guaranteeing freedom of belief, faith and worship. But how is India as a whole and its current government protecting that fundamental freedom?

Tensions among Indians of different faiths are not new. In 2002, violence between Hindus and Muslims led to the death of over 1,000 people and the displacement of over 100,000, mainly Muslims, in Gujarat. In 2008, in the eastern state of Odisha, Hindus blamed Christians for the death of a swami and went on a rampage, killing an estimated 100 persons, injuring over 10,000, displacing 50,000. The fact that a Maoist group claimed responsibility for the swami's killing made no difference. Hundreds of Christian churches and thousands of homes were torched. Some Christians were forced to undergo "reconversion" to Hinduism as a pre-requisite for being able to return to their villages. Several Indian states have enacted laws that criminalize conversion by Hindus to other faiths. Some also label any offer of humanitarian, health or educational assistance as "inducement" to convert, an act that can be prosecuted.

Religious minorities have felt increasingly under attack following the 2014 election in which the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a majority of Parliamentary seats and elected Narendra Modi as Prime Minister. The BJP and its charitable arm, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), are known to promote Hindu nationalism. Some in that party

seek to define India as a "Hindu" nation in terms of language, culture and religion. There are BJP politicians who have become outspoken in their criticism of religious minorities. One prominent RSS official claimed that Mother Teresa's only motivation for serving the poor was to gain converts. The attacks are not limited to hate speech. There have been physical assaults on religious minorities, their homes, schools, businesses and places of worship. Christian villagers have been denied access to water and to their fields. The burning of St. Sebastian's Church in Delhi at the end of 2014 was just one stark example of the violence being perpetrated against religious minorities.

In response, the Archbishop of Delhi and other Christian clergy signed a statement in December 2014 decrying violence against Christians as being against the Constitution of India and its guarantees of freedom of religion. They said, "In a secular and democratic India, there is no place for a state religion. India is not a theocracy." President Obama echoed these concerns in his visit to that country in January 2015, saying India is "a place where, in past years, religious faiths of all types have, on occasion, been targeted by other peoples of faith, simply due to their heritage and their beliefs." Perhaps in reaction, in February 2015, Prime Minister Modi condemned "violence against any religion on any pretext" and promised strong action, saying, "Nobody has the right to discriminate on the basis of religion.... All religions should flourish." One can hope that his words will be heeded by others in the BJP and its associated organizations so that the acceptance of diversity outlined in the Indian Constitution can be fully realized and religious minorities will feel protected and secure.