



Religious Freedom in India: Intolerance Winning Over Secularism?

Religious intolerance is on the rise in India, despite its founding as a secular democracy. A leading Hindu praised attacks on Christian churches, saying they are not places of worship but rather “factories for conversion of Hindus into Christianity.” He went on to urge the central government to protect those who carry out attacks. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India strongly condemned these remarks as “highly provocative and irresponsible.” They highlighted the escalating violence against Christians and other minorities.

Since mid-2014 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi won a Parliamentary majority, religious minorities have felt increasingly under attack. The reason? The BJP and its volunteer arm, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), are known to promote Hindu nationalism, defining India as a “Hindu” nation in terms of language, culture and religion. One report documenting the first 300 days of Modi’s government revealed more than 600 cases of violence against religious minorities, including the rape of a 70 year old nun. Christians and Muslims have been assaulted and died. Places of worship, schools, businesses and homes have been destroyed. St. Sebastian’s Church in Delhi was burned at the end of 2014 and St. Mary’s Church in Agra was desecrated in March 2015. Yet the police appear slow to investigate any of these cases, so the perpetrators operate with impunity. The fact that a priest was dragged from his car and beaten by a mob outside a police station indicates the vulnerability of religious minorities.

This was not how it was supposed to be. India is a land where different faiths, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, were born and have long thrived. It is believed that the Apostle Thomas introduced Christianity in the first century AD and Islam arrived in the 7th century. India now has the third largest Muslim population in the world. Given this history, the 1950 Indian Constitution declared the

country to be a secular republic guaranteeing freedom of religion. But that ideal is being severely tested.

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 Odisha, Hindus blamed Christians for the death of a swami and went on a rampage, killing an estimated 100 persons, injuring thousands, forcing over 50,000 to flee. 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. Seven years later, 10,000 are still afraid to return home. 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 of 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.

The Archbishop of Delhi and other Christian clergy signed a statement in December 2014 decrying violence against Christians as being unconstitutional. 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.” In December 2015, Cardinal Baselios Cleemis, president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, called on the government to take seriously the anxieties of religious minorities and to make “all efforts to keep its citizens in peace and tranquility.”

