

THE BACKSLIDING STATE OF MINORITIES IN INDIA

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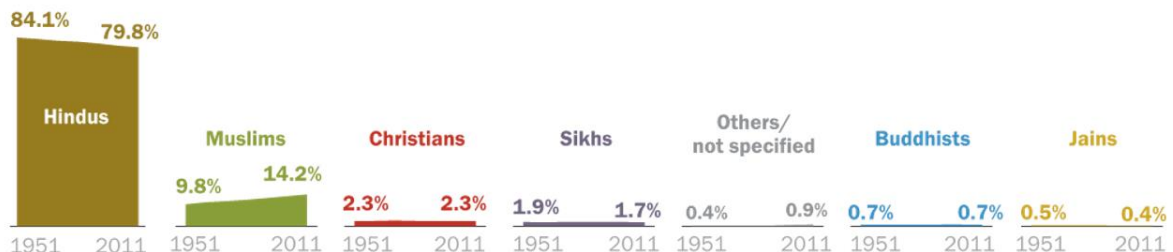
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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



India is an amalgam of various ethnicities and religious groups. The Pew Research Centre estimates that 79.8% of India’s population comprises Hindus. Muslims formulate 14.2% of the country’s population while the remaining 6% include Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains.¹



Source: Census of India, 1951-2011.
 "Religious Composition of India"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research Center, Report 2021

The state of minorities in any country is indicative of its pluralistic charms and flourishing democracy. However, the recent Human Rights Watch Report 2022 highlights that there is an

¹ Stephanie Kramer, "Key Findings About the Religious Composition of India," Pew Research Center, last modified September 21, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/21/key-findings-about-the-religious-composition-of-india/>

increase in crimes against minorities in India.² The report maintains that the discriminatory laws adopted by the government emboldens Hindu Nationalist group to operate with impunity and to target minorities.³ Previously, India has hit the news due to the ill-treatment of minorities. In 2020, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, an independent government agency granted India its lowest ranking i.e. “a country of particular concern.” The report states, “The national government allowed violence against minorities and their houses of worship to continue with impunity, and also engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence.”⁴

A peek into the incidents of only the past six months provides a gruesome picture of minorities in India. On 3rd October 2021, a mob of 200 Hindus vandalized a Christian Church in Uttarakhand. Several Christians were physically injured during the attack. The mob was allegedly linked to far-right groups: Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), Bajrang Dal, and the BJP youth wing. According to eye-witnesses, they chanted religious slogans like “Jai Shree Ram” and “Vande Mataram”⁵ during the attack. This incident happened right after VHP threatened to demolish churches in Madhya Pradesh.⁶ Previously, churches in Chhattisgarh were also attacked by the same groups.⁷

The local authorities maintain that Christians are forcefully converting Hindus in certain states⁸ and these attacks are an effort to protect the Hindu religion. Golihatti Shekhar, BJP MLA carried a meeting of the Legislature Committee on Backward Classes and Minorities Welfare in Karnataka on 13th October 2021. During the meeting, he expressed concern over the conversion of residences to Churches in Karnataka and Chitradurga and asked to look for unauthorized churches and check forced religious conversions.⁹

This attitude by the government ministers has allowed the perpetrators of these hate crimes to operate with impunity. According to the United Christian Forum, an advocacy group with a hotline

² "World Report 2022: Rights Trends in India," Human Rights Watch, February 10, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2022/country-chapters/india>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ US Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, April 2020, 20. https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/USCIRF%202020%20Annual%20Report_42720_new_0.pdf.

⁵ The Quint, "Uttarakhand: Local Right-Wing Groups Attack Church in Roorkee, Several Hurt," *The Quint*, October 5, 2021, <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/uttarakhand-local-right-wing-groups-attack-church-in-roorkee-several-hurt>.

⁶ Ismat Ara, "'VHP Threatening To Demolish Churches in MP,' Bishop Appeals to President To Intervene," *The Wire*, September 26, 2021, <https://thewire.in/communalism/vhp-hindutva-communalism-churches-madhya-pradesh>.

⁷ "India's Christians Living in Fear As Claims of 'forced Conversions' Swirl," *The Guardian*, October 4, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/oct/04/india-christians-living-in-fear-claims-forced-conversions>.

⁸ "Karnataka Orders Survey of Churches to 'check Forced Conversions,'" *The Times of India*, last modified October 16, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/karnataka-orders-survey-of-churches-to-check-forced-conversions/articleshow/87053115.cms>.

⁹ Ibid.

for Christians targeted due to their faith, there have been “478 instances of violence and harassment against Christians in 2021. This is over a 70% rise from 2020 when 279 such cases were reported on their helpline.”¹⁰ Moving forward, December 2021, witnessed two separate public events where Hindu religious leaders incited their followers to take up arms against minorities including Muslims in the country. Even on Christmas eve, the Indian media reported seven different incidents of hate against Christians.¹¹

The saga of persecution and vilification of minorities does not end here. Modi’s India has entered a new low of discrimination against Hindu minority groups like Dalits.¹² The National Crime Records Bureau reported that “50,291 cases of crimes against Dalits were reported in 2020, an increase of 9.4 percent over the previous year. Crimes against tribal communities also increased by 9.3 percent, at 8,272 cases.”¹³ The cases were especially on the rise in the following states:

Highest No. of Cases Reported against Dalits in India:

State	No. of Cases Reported in 2020	Previous Cases Reported in 2019
Uttar Pradesh	12,714	---
Bihar	7,368	6,544
Rajasthan	7,017	6,794
Madhya Pradesh	6,899	5,300
Maharashtra	2,569	2,150

Source: The National Crime Records Bureau Report 2020¹⁴

The exclusionary politics against Muslims is a known phenomenon in India. At the start of 2022 alone, the Gulli Bai Incident hit headlines where many Muslim women found themselves a target to an online controversy where their pictures were posted on a website with a caption “on sale.”¹⁵ Few

¹⁰ Naomi Barton, "Hindutva Brigade Disrupts 7 Christmas Events Across India," *The Wire*, accessed February 23, 2022, <https://thewire.in/communalism/seven-incidents-across-india-where-the-hindutva-brigade-disrupted-christmas-celebrations>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "India," Minority Rights Group, last modified November 17, 2020, <https://minorityrights.org/country/india/>.

¹³ Shemin Joy, "Crimes Against Dalits, Tribals Rise by over 9% Amid Lockdown," *Deccan Herald*, last modified September 16, 2021, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/crimes-against-dalits-tribals-rise-by-over-9-amid-lockdown-1030962.html>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Srishti Jaswal, "Bulli Bai: India’s Muslim Women Again Listed on App for ‘auction’," *Al Jazeera*, January 2, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/2/bulli-bai-muslim-women-auction-online-india>.

weeks into the Gulli Bai incident and the hijab row ¹⁶ surfaced in India. A video of a young girl, Muskaan went viral; morphing into an entire movement against the ban on Hijab in Karnataka.

The big questions arise where these incidents of hate are taking India and why is there a resurgence of these crimes?

In this backdrop, it is interesting to note that there is a seven-stage election going on in Uttar Pradesh.¹⁷ UP alone makes up 15 percent of seats in Lok Sabha (the lower house of Indian Parliament) in India. For years, Modi has failed to picture India in any color other than Saffron. The recent surge in crimes against minorities could be another effort by RSS-BJP nexus to gain more votes in UP where BJP leaders are portraying their opponents as "Muslims" and "Muslims as Terrorists" in their election campaigns. Whether they would be victorious in their nefarious aims or not, would be clear on 10th March 2022 when the election results are announced. However, the irony that the loser in the equation is no one but India itself could not be starker.

¹⁶ Imran Qureshi, "Hijab Row: The India Woman Who is the Face of the Fight to Wear Headscarf," BBC News, February 10, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-60328864>.

¹⁷ "Uttar Pradesh Assembly Elections 2022: The Indian Polls Everyone is Watching," BBC News, last modified February 8, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-38916161>.