

### INDIA'S HUMAN RIGHTS RECORDS ARE COSTING IT GLOBAL IMAGE

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do  
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#### Introduction

At a time when India has been investing much in showcasing its muscle as an important emerging power, its deteriorating relations with some key Western countries have pushed New Delhi deep into a diplomatic conundrum. Reported involvement of the Indian government officials in assassination plots inside Canada and the U.S. has caused an unprecedented rift in India's relations with these countries. On the other hand, a recent report of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), while highlighting continuously mounting challenges for minorities, rights groups, and critics of the Indian government inside India, recommends Washington enhance its diplomatic pressure on New Delhi. This poses serious challenges for India's credibility in the Western capitals that are already suspicious of its apparent double-face in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Since 2014, the United States and its powerful Western allies had turned a deaf ear to the calls for protecting human rights in India under the Modi regime. Arguably, the Western block was more focused on the geostrategic calculations, including 'containment' of China with India as a potential 'counter-weight'. This strategy raised serious questions about the liberal West's commitment to human rights and freedoms while giving New Delhi an easy pass and muzzle the dissenting voices

inside as well as opponents outside its territory. India's South Asian neighbours have been all too familiar with, and affected by, New Delhi's interventionism in their internal affairs. Now, the Western world is experiencing India's state-sponsored attempts to assassinate critics on the soil of Canada, the U.S., and Australia.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, according to a new report released by the USCIRF, New Delhi's internal records indicate a continuous backslide of human rights, shrinking space for minorities and their advocates, and legislations aimed at curbing basic freedoms and rights of religious minorities. Within this context, the much touted Indian diplomatic heft and 'soft power' is facing formidable challenges to stave off the creeping negative image, with New Delhi also scrambling to prevent further straining its relations with the Western world.

### India's Diplomatic Troubles: The Recent Episode

India's foreign relations have faced challenges one after the other since June 2023. After more than year-long investigations of the killing of a Canadian citizen Hardeep Singh Nijjar, the Canadian government formally accused the agents of the Indian government of plotting the assassination. While Canada accuses India of 'violating its sovereignty', New Delhi blames Ottawa for harbouring 'separatist' elements and letting them use its soil to incite terrorism in India.<sup>2</sup> With each side expelling six members of the other's diplomatic staff last week, relations between the two countries are at a historic low.

Canada's strong reaction to India's alleged act of terrorism on its soil apparently had a nod from the United States as well. While the U.S. had urged New Delhi to cooperate with Canada last year, the State Department recently expressed frustration that India did not choose that path.<sup>3</sup> Only to add to New Delhi's problems overseas, the U.S. agencies have also been investigating a failed assassination plan targeting Gurpatwant Singh Pannun, another Sikh activist of Indian origin, based in New York.

Interestingly, however, India's attitude and pattern of response toward the two crises has been marked by a stark contrast: While New Delhi reacted to Canada's accusations in strong words and commensurate actions, blaming the Trudeau administration of facilitating and protecting 'terrorist'

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<sup>1</sup> Dias, Avani, Dylan Welch, Mayeta Clark, Mridula Amin, and Nick Wiggins. 2024. "Narendra Modi's Indian government and its allies accused of spying, silencing Sikh critics and pushing its far-right ideology in Australia." ABC News. June 16, 2024. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-06-17/modis-indian-government-accused-of-spying-silencing-critics/103974414>.

<sup>2</sup> Economic Times, "India 'violated Canada's Sovereignty': Justin Trudeau Levels New Allegations Against New Delhi," *The Economic Times*, October 17, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/justin-trudeau-accuses-india-of-clear-violations-of-canadian-sovereignty/articleshow/114291172.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>3</sup> Economic Times, "Global eyes on India-Canada row: Here's what 'Five Eyes' allies are saying," *The Economic Times*, October 16, 2024, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/global-eyes-on-india-canada-row-heres-what-five-eyes-allies-are-saying/articleshow/114291845.cms?from=mdr>.

elements inside its territory, it has been very forthcoming in extending cooperation to Washington in investigation of the assassination attempt against Pannun. Recently, India informed the U.S. of arresting Vikash Yadav, the main culprit behind the assassination plan, in response to which, the U.S. expressed satisfaction with New Delhi's cooperation thus far.<sup>4</sup>

The ongoing friction in India's relations with Canada, and the reported involvement of Indian officials in an assassination attempt on U.S. soil, substantiate the allegations of cross-border terrorism that South Asian states have been levelling against India in general and the Modi regime in particular.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, the human rights and religious freedom records inside India are far from improving, as international agencies and rights groups continue to note.

### **USCIRF recommends strict action against India**

In its annual report for the year 2024, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedoms recommended to the U.S. Department of State, among others, to designate India as "a country of particular concern", citing the erosion of religious freedoms, especially of Muslims and Christians, under state patronage.<sup>6</sup> Its recent report published in October 2024 notes that the suppression of minorities continued before and after India's general election. The report highlights that throughout the year, vigilante groups were free to kill, beat and lynch individuals on the basis of religious differences, and religious sites and properties belonging to members of religious minorities continued to be demolished. Political leaders including top government officials like Narendra Modi and Amit Shah contributed in spreading disinformation and misinformation in order to ignite Hindu sentiment against minorities, chiefly for political gains. The report further examines the role of the country's existing and recently-introduced legal framework in targeting and disenfranchising religious minorities and their advocates among civil society.<sup>7</sup>

The report calls upon Washington to devise a three-fold strategy at bilateral level in order to dissuade India from further suppressing its religious minorities: (i) putting targeted sanctions on the Indian government officials responsible for severe religious freedom violations; (ii) conditioning arm

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<sup>4</sup> Prashant Jha, "India tells US 'CC1' arrested as team heads to Washington," *Hindustan Times*, October 14, 2024, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-tells-us-cc1-arrested-as-team-heads-to-washington-101728933357929.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Ellis-Petersen, Aakash Hassan, and Shah Meer Baloch, "Indian government ordered killings in Pakistan, intelligence officials claim," *The Guardian*, April 5, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/04/indian-government-assassination-allegations-pakistan-intelligence-officials>.

<sup>6</sup> "2024 Annual Report," USCIRF, n.d., <https://www.uscifr.gov/publication/2024-annual-report>.

<sup>7</sup> "India Country Update," USCIRF, October 2, 2024., <https://www.uscifr.gov/publications/india-country-update-0>.

sales based on improved religious freedom conditions; and (iii) prioritising religious freedoms in bilateral meetings with the Indian government officials.

Earlier, in March this year, the United Nations human rights experts expressed serious concerns over continuing “attacks on religious, racial and ethnic minorities, on women and girls on intersecting grounds, and on civil society, including human rights defenders and the media” in India. While reminding New Delhi of its obligations regarding human rights, they articulated sheer dissatisfaction with the government’s flimsy response to UN calls on its human rights records. Out of 78 communications initiated by the UN human rights experts since 2019, only 18 managed to get a response from India.<sup>8</sup> While considering the CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) discriminatory, Amnesty International lashes out at its operationalization, arguing *inter alia* that the law fails to recognize and expand protections to Rohingyas, world’s most persecuted minority from Myanmar, and Sri Lankan Tamils which form the largest refugee community in India.<sup>9</sup>

The Canada-India diplomatic row, investigations being carried out by the U.S. Department of Justice on assassination attempt of Pannun, and the USCIRF report on religious freedoms in India, collectively indicate that Indian agencies under the Modi regime are dead set to go after the vocal minority members even if they are based outside India. Coupled with investigations going on in Canada and the U.S., the USCIRF recommendations have the potential to seriously damage India’s image and its interests overseas, if accepted by the State Department.

## Conclusion

After enjoying decade-long virtual amnesty on its human rights and religious freedom records from the Western governments, the Modi government seems now to be trapped into its own net of terror, conspiracy and foxy diplomacy. The serious allegations levelled by the Canadian government and the U.S. Department of Justice will keep haunting India’s diplomacy and soft power for a long time, as other Western governments will also be wary of India’s covert activities in the diplomatic garb on their soil. While this moment tests India’s oft-celebrated ‘bargaining’ power, it also brings forth an opportunity for the U.S. and relevant Western countries to reconsider their approach

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<sup>8</sup> “India: UN experts urge corrective action to protect human rights and end attacks against minorities in lead up to elections.” 2024. UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. March 7, 2024. Accessed October 23, 2024. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/india-un-experts-urge-corrective-action-protect-human-rights-and-end-attacks>.

<sup>9</sup> Amnesty International. 2024. “India: Citizenship Amendment Act is a blow to Indian constitutional values and international standards.” March 20, 2024. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/india-citizenship-amendment-act-is-a-blow-to-indian-constitutional-values-and-international-standards/>.

toward India's human rights records, and pressurize New Delhi through diplomatic and political means, as the USCIRF report recommends, to take corrective measures.