



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

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Increasing Abuses against Religious Minorities in India

Introduction

Religious freedom conditions in India have continued to worsen throughout 2024, particularly in the months prior to and immediately following the country's national elections. In addition to the enforcement of discriminatory state-level legislation and propagation of hateful rhetoric, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government made a concerted effort to implement election promises that negatively and disproportionately impacted religious minorities and their ability to practice their faith. Such promises included enacting the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), inaugurating the Ram Temple in Ayodhya, and introducing a national code to replace religion-specific personal laws. Each action was justified by government officials as necessary to protect India's "cultural [and] linguistic heritage"—a common euphemism for Hindu supremacy, often at the expense of religious minorities.

This report provides an overview of the various religious freedom violations that have taken place in India during 2024. It focuses on changes to the country's legal framework, including the strengthening of discriminatory legislation like state-level anti-conversion and anti-terrorism laws, as well as the implementation of the CAA and the Uniform Civil Code (UCC). It also examines the increasing frequency of attacks against religious minorities and their advocates, including the targeting of places of worship.

Laws and Other Challenges to Religious Freedom at the National Level

The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA)

In May 2024, the Indian government published the [rules](#) for implementing the 2019 Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), fulfilling a long-anticipated BJP campaign promise. Amending the country's 1955 Citizenship Act, the CAA [established](#) a religious criterion for fast-track citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants (from Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, or Christian communities) fleeing neighboring Muslim-majority countries, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The law excludes Muslim refugees, including Rohingya Muslims from Burma and Ahmadiyya Muslims from Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as Tamil Hindus from Sri Lanka. The act states that an individual must have lived or worked in India prior to December 31, 2014, in order to apply for citizenship.



Critics argue that the CAA violates the Indian constitution's principles prohibiting religious discrimination and its guarantees of equal protection under the law. Mass protests followed the initial announcement in 2019, in which hundreds were injured and thousands arrested—some of whom remained in detention as of September 2024, including [Umar Khalid](#), [Meeran Haider](#), and [Sharjeel Imam](#). The recent announcement of the implementation rules initiated a surge of new protests as well as a number of petitions challenging the CAA before the Supreme Court.

Several Indian states have expressed opposition to the CAA. In 2019, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Kerala, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh all moved resolutions against the CAA. In February 2024, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu [stressed](#) that he would not allow implementation of the CAA in that state, as he would “stand with minorities and our Sri Lankan brethren.” Similarly, in March, the chief minister of West Bengal voiced her opposition to the act, arguing that it would be used to “turn legal citizens into foreigners.” Kerala was the first state to legally challenge the CAA and in March [renewed](#) its 2020 plea before the Supreme Court, emphasizing that the law's classification based on religion and country is discriminatory. In June, the Madhya Pradesh government [granted](#) Indian citizenship to three applicants under the CAA.

National Register of Citizens (NRC)

Human rights advocates argue that the National Register of Citizens (NRC), in combination with the CAA, would allow the Indian government to expel those it deemed noncitizens, posing particular risk to the country's Muslim population. The government first piloted the NRC in Assam in 2018, when it sought to separate Indian citizens from “undocumented immigrants” living in that state. The NRC requires residents to prove they or their ancestors had entered Assam prior to March 24, 1971, or face exclusion from the register. In 2019, the Assam government published its list of names of those it considered Indian citizens according to the NRC, omitting 1.9 million names. Of these [1.9 million](#), an estimated 700,000 were Muslims, 500,000 were Bengali Hindus, and 200,000 were from the Assamese Hindu groups Koch-Rajbongshi, Das, Kalita, and Sarma.

In July 2024, the Assam government [ordered](#) police to cease referring people entitled to Indian citizenship—under the CAA—to Foreigners' Tribunals, which function as quasi-judicial bodies that authorities task with determining whether an individual is a “suspected foreigner.” Despite this order, police in Assam that same month, in conjunction with the Foreigners' Tribunals, declared 28 Muslims as “non-citizens” and sent them to a deportation center. In September, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced that all individuals must submit an NRC application in order to receive identity cards.

Expropriation and Demolition of Places of Worship and Muslim Property

Since the beginning of 2024, Indian authorities have facilitated the expropriation of places of worship, including the construction of Hindu temples on the sites of mosques. Most notably, Prime Minister Narendra Modi led the consecration of the Ram Temple in Ayodhya in January, fulfilling a key campaign promise. Indian authorities had constructed the temple atop the ruins of the Babri Masjid, which a Hindu mob had demolished in 1992 in their belief that it marked the birthplace of Lord Ram. The site was long contested; India's [Supreme Court ruled](#) in 2019 that the mosque's destruction was an "egregious violation" of the law and yet granted the site to Hindus while offering Muslims a separate plot of land to construct a new mosque—which remains unbuilt as of September 2024.

The days following the temple's January 2024 consecration were marked by a [series of attacks](#) and other instances of intolerance against religious minorities across six states. In each instance, violence erupted following Hindu nationalist processions through predominantly Muslim neighbors. In Maharashtra, violence broke out along [Mira Road](#), where police stood by as mobs vandalized dozens of Muslim-owned shops. Several reports indicate that the police arrested Muslim youths, despite receiving dozens of complaints against the actions of the Hindu mob. In the aftermath of the Mira Road violence, municipal authorities returned with bulldozers to [demolish](#) structures they deemed illegal. Commonly referred to as "bulldozer justice," state authorities have [repeatedly](#) used bulldozers to [demolish](#) Muslim property under the guise of removing "illegal" structures, including homes, businesses, and places of worship.

In February, for example, the Delhi Development Authority (DDA) demolished the 600-year-old Akhoondji Mosque, alleging that the building was an illegal encroachment. The mosque's imam argued that he did not receive written notice before the demolition. The DDA has also announced its intention to demolish 20 religious structures in the forested areas of Sanjay Van, including 16 Muslim shrines. A court order [claimed](#) that Delhi "already had sufficient dargahs and temples" and that the forest needed restoration. The same month, in Uttarakhand, the demolition of a mosque and Muslim seminary by police and government officials sparked deadly clashes and an internet shutdown. In July, the DDA demolished the Faizyab Mosque and Madrassa in Delhi's Sarai Kale Khan area.

Places of Worship Act

Beyond demolitions, the government has expropriated several mosques for alternative purposes, directly violating India's [Places of Worship \(Special Provisions\) Act](#). The 1991 act froze the status of all religious places of worship as they existed in August 1947 and prohibits their conversion to any other faith. While the act does not apply to the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, it extends protection to all other places of worship. Despite this law, an Indian court [ruled](#) in February that Hindus can worship inside the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi, which Hindus claim rests on the site of an ancient Hindu temple. The same month, BJP MP Harnath Singh Yadav [called for](#) the repeal of the Places of Worship Act, calling it "unconstitutional."

Waqf Amendment Bill

In addition, many Muslims have expressed concern regarding the Indian government's introduction of the [Waqf Amendment Bill](#) in August, which seeks to repeal the 1995 Waqf Act. A waqf is an endowment (movable or immovable) that Muslims can give for a specific pious or charitable purpose, according to Islamic tradition. Once registered as a waqf, such property—which may include land, graveyards, or buildings—is deemed nontransferable and held in perpetuity as such. All mosques in India are considered waqf properties, under the management of Muslim bodies in every state, known as Waqf Boards.

The 2024 Waqf Amendment Bill seeks to broaden the government's regulatory authority over these endowments and proposes the mandatory inclusion of non-Muslim members on Waqf Boards. It also seeks to prohibit the designation of a given property as a waqf based on its owner's oral declaration alone. Legal experts and Muslim leaders [argue](#) that these provisions would erode their community's autonomy over its own religious institutions. The introduction of this legislation follows the increased proliferation of disinformation regarding the distribution of wealth among India's Muslim communities, including [derogatory comments](#) that Prime Minister Modi made during the national election.

State and Local Laws Impacting Religious Minorities

Uniform Civil Code and Personal Status Laws

Since 2019, Prime Minister Modi and the BJP have [articulated](#) their intention to implement a Uniform Civil Code (UCC) to overrule existing personal laws that are highly integrated with religious beliefs. Such personal laws include areas such as marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance, and succession. Critics argue that a UCC would contradict secular principles while failing to adequately represent the needs and values of the country's myriad and diverse religious communities.

In February, the legislative assembly of Uttarakhand [passed](#) a state-level UCC bill, establishing a uniform set of rules on personal status law that includes marriage, divorce, succession, and inheritance. This bill is widely considered to represent a template for other states to adopt. The UCC sets the minimum age for marriage at 18. While Hindu and secular laws set age restrictions for men and women, there are no such limitations for Muslims and other communities. Some Muslim communities have [characterized](#) the UCC as a threat to Islamic practices, preferring to observe Shari'a as the basis for personal law, and some Sikh organizations have similarly [rejected](#) it, arguing that it "undermines Sikh identity."

The UCC further requires "live-in" relationships to be registered within a month and establishes criminal punishments, including six months in jail, for failing to do so. Such provisions would allow for further policing of interfaith couples, who already face risks including [threats of violence](#) from family members. In July, for example, the Uttarakhand high court [directed](#) police to provide protection to an interfaith couple in a live-in relationship and instructed them to register under the UCC. The couple reported receiving threats from their parents about their relationship.

Anti-Conversion Laws

In addition to the UCC and other legislation, authorities frequently used state-level policies throughout the first part of 2024, including [anti-conversion laws](#), to target religious minorities across India. As USCIRF previously reported, 12 of India's 28 states currently maintain anti-conversion laws and enforce them to varying degrees. These laws prohibit conversion under circumstances that far exceed cases of coercion, and they are often punishable by hefty fines and prison terms. Authorities frequently enforce such laws under the pretext of

preventing so-called "love jihad"—a conspiracy theory that claims Muslim men target and seduce Hindu women for conversion to Islam—while in effect targeting interfaith relationships.

Since the beginning of the year, authorities have arrested dozens of Christians on allegations of conducting or participating in forced conversions. In June, for example, police in Uttar Pradesh [detained](#) 13 Christians, including four pastors; in July, seven Christians faced [accusations](#) of violating the state's anti-conversion law in two separate incidents. That same month, government officials from Uttar Pradesh tabled a bill that would strengthen the state's anti-conversion law, including expanding the punishment for conversion to life imprisonment, allowing anyone to file a First Instance Report (FIR) against suspected violators, and making religious conversion a nonbailable offense.

Several other states made similar efforts to introduce or strengthen existing anti-conversion laws. In February, for example, the state of Chhattisgarh [announced](#) it would introduce legislation to address "illegal conversion," claiming that Christian pastors had forcibly converted Hindus. In February, the Assam government passed the [Assam Healing \(Prevention of Evil\) Practices Bill](#), which bans individuals or groups from performing "non-scientific" healing, such as prayer, to treat illnesses. The chief minister of Assam further noted his intention to restrict Christian evangelism and conversion in the state with the bill. In April, the government of Gujarat issued a circular mandating that Hindus wishing to convert to Buddhism, Sikhism, or Jainism obtain approval from their district magistrate under the Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act. In June, the BJP-led government in Rajasthan [withdrew](#) its 2008 anti-conversion law in favor of new legislation aimed at "curbing alleged cases of 'love jihad'" and religious conversion. Additionally, as of August, appeals challenging the constitutionality of anti-conversion laws were [pending](#) in seven states: Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, and Uttar Pradesh.

Anti-Cow Slaughter Laws

India's [constitution](#) directs states to take steps to prohibit the slaughter of cows and calves, considered sacred in Hinduism. As a result, 20 of India's 28 states currently enforce anti-cow slaughter laws. Vigilante groups and self-proclaimed "cow protectors" frequently exploit such laws to target religious minorities, including Muslims, Christians, and Dalits.

An estimated [dozen attacks](#) involving “cow vigilantism” took place following India’s national elections in June. In August, for example, a group of cow vigilantes beat a Muslim migrant worker to death, falsely accusing him of having eaten beef. A day later, a group of Hindu men violently attacked a 72-year-old Muslim man because they believed he was carrying beef in his bag. The same month, a group of “cow protectors” shot and [killed](#) a 19-year-old Hindu student because they thought he was a Muslim smuggling cows. While arrests were made in each of these cases, perpetrators of such attacks often operate with impunity; they rarely face punishment and are often released on bail within 24 hours.

Other Significant Religious Freedom Challenges across India

Hate Speech, Misinformation and Disinformation

In the leadup to the June 2024 elections, political officials increasingly wielded hate speech and discriminatory rhetoric against Muslims and other religious minorities. Prime Minister Modi [repeatedly](#) claimed that the opposition party would “wipe out [the] Hindu faith from the country” and had plans to make Hindus “second class citizens in their own country.” He perpetuated hateful stereotypes about Muslims, referring to them as “infiltrators.” Union Home Minister Amit Shah echoed these statements and [insisted](#) falsely that opposition leaders would impose Shari’a if elected—despite the fact that the opposition [election manifesto](#) included no mention of Shari’a or Muslims.

Additionally, [misinformation](#), [disinformation](#), and hate speech by Indian government officials frequently fuel and incite cow vigilantism and other attacks against religious minorities. The attacks against Muslims in Mira Road following the inauguration of the Ram Temple in January, for example, erupted following [inflammatory speeches](#) by two Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), Nitesh Rane and Geeta Jain. Rane reportedly openly threatened the Muslim community, using offensive language and urging the Hindu community to “ignite and retaliate.” While First Instance Reports (FIRs) were filed against Rane and Jain, Mumbai police [argued](#) in July that the use of terms like “jihadis,” “Rohingya,” and “Bangladeshis” were not aimed at the Muslim community and therefore did not fall under Section 295A of the penal code.

The same month, the United Nations (UN) Committee on Racial Discrimination (CERD) expressed [concern](#) about an

increase in hate speech targeting Rohingya refugees and the Indian government’s role in arbitrary mass detention and forcible return of that community to Burma.

Following Rane and Jain’s speeches, BJP Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) T. Raja Singh gave a [40-minute speech](#) in February stoking religious tensions, in which he openly called for violence against Muslims and for the further demolition of mosques in Kashi and Mathura. Singh claimed that Muslims were facilitating the forceful conversion of Hindus and repeatedly referred to Rohingya and Bangladeshi Muslims as “illegal.” He encouraged his audience to be “prepared to fight for the protection of our country and religion” and to fight against “love jihad,” forced conversion, and cow slaughter.

Attacks against Religious Minorities

In March, a group of UN experts [raised alarm](#) about the level of violence and hate crimes against religious minorities in the leadup to national elections, including vigilante violence, targeted and arbitrary killings, demolition of property, and harassment. They called on the Indian government to fulfill its obligation to prohibit religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination and violence.

From January to March [161 incidents](#) of violence against Christians in India were reported—47 of which occurred in the state of Chhattisgarh. Such incidents ranged from violent attacks on churches and prayer meetings to physical assaults, harassment, and false allegations of forced conversion. Muslims continued to be targeted, as well. In March, a group of Hindus in Gujarat violently [attacked](#) foreign Muslim university students as they gathered for prayer during Ramadan. The university subsequently issued new guidelines, [instructing](#) students not to pray in common spaces. Moreover, following the election results, during which the BJP lost its national majority, at least [28 attacks](#) against Muslims occurred from June to August.

Religious educational institutions were also subjected to harassment and targeting. In February, for example, Hindu organizations entered a Catholic school in Assam and [demanded](#) instructors cease using Christian images and symbols. In March, the Allahabad High Court passed a [judgment](#) striking down a previous ruling on the governance of madrasas, effectively banning Islamic schools in that state and ordering the public school enrollment of students whom the closures had impacted.

Crackdown on Civil Society and Faith-Based Organizations

In 2024 the government of India has expanded its tactics of repression to target religious minorities and their advocates abroad. Journalists, academics, and civil society organizations documenting India's religious freedom violations have reported facing denial of consular services, including the [revocation](#) of Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards as well as threats of violence and surveillance. In April, international reporting [linked](#) an official in India's [Research and Analysis Wing](#) (RAW) to the 2023 [assassination attempt](#) of an American Sikh activist in New York.

Additionally, Indian authorities have repeatedly used discriminatory legislation to target religious communities and those advocating on their behalf. Authorities continued to exploit antiterror and financing laws, including the [Unlawful Activities Prevention Act \(UAPA\)](#), to crack down on civil society organizations, religious minorities, human rights defenders, and journalists reporting on religious freedom. The UAPA was enacted in 1967 but amended in 2019, allowing the government to designate individuals as "terrorists" without due process. The law vaguely defines "unlawful activity" as any action "intended to disrupt India's sovereignty, integrity or security," including "disruptive speech." In 2024, several religious minorities and human rights activists have continued to face detention without trial under the UAPA, including [Hany Babu](#) and [Rona Wilson](#). Academic and human rights activist [GN Saibaba](#), whom authorities detained under the UAPA in 2017 for criticizing state violence against religious minorities, was ultimately released in March but [described](#) how police had abused him, tortured him, and denied him medical care while in custody.

Similarly, organizations that document and advocate for religious freedom continue to face harassment and, in some cases, are forced to shut down operations. Like the UAPA, authorities have used India's [Foreign Contribution Regulation Act](#) (FCRA) to obstruct the work of civil society organizations. FCRA regulates access to foreign

funds for individuals and organizations and prohibits receipt of foreign funds for "any activities [deemed] detrimental to the national interest" of India. The law requires nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to apply for FCRA licenses to receive foreign funding, but authorities can readily revoke such licenses. In April, India's Home Ministry [canceled](#) the FCRA licenses of five NGOs, preventing them from using existing funds. Those NGOs included the Church of North India (CNI) Synodical Board of Social Service, Church's Auxiliary for Social Action, and Evangelical Fellowship of India. In total, the Indian government has canceled [over 20,000](#) FCRA registrations since 2012.

Replacing India's Criminal Code

In July, the Indian government moved to replace its colonial-era criminal laws with three new laws: the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), and Bharatiya Sakshya Adhinayam (BSA). These laws replaced the 1860 Indian Penal Code, the 1973 Code of Criminal Procedure, and the 1872 Indian Evidence Act, respectively. Human rights groups [argue](#) that the enforcement of these new laws may have exacerbated the targeting of religious minorities and their advocates.

Such legislation may pose an additional threat to freedom of expression, association, and right to a free trial, particularly for religious minorities. The BNS specifically adds a new provision criminalizing "acts endangering the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India" and increases the minimum punishment from three years to seven. It also expands the criminalization of the promotion of "enmity between different groups on the grounds of religion" to include electronic communications. Reporting [indicates](#) that this provision has already served as a pretext for targeting [journalists](#) who reported on an alleged mob lynching of a Muslim man in Uttar Pradesh. The BNSS additionally allows for police to seek 15-day detention of an accused individual at any time before they have completed 40–60 days of the allowed remand period.



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Conclusion

Religious freedom conditions in India continue to follow a deteriorating and concerning trajectory. The Indian government continues to repress and restrict religious communities through the enforcement of discriminatory legislation like anti-conversion laws, cow slaughter laws, and antiterrorism laws. In doing so, authorities have arbitrarily detained individuals highlighting violations of religious freedom, including religious leaders, journalists, and human rights activists, without due process—in some cases for years. Indian officials have repeatedly employed hateful and derogatory rhetoric and misinformation to perpetuate false narratives about religious minorities, inciting widespread violence, lynchings, and demolition of places of worship.

In its [2024 Annual Report](#), USCIRF recommended that the U.S. Department of State designate India as a Country of Particular Concern for engaging in particularly severe religious freedom violations. This report further outlines a number of policy recommendations that the U.S. government can take to address religious freedom violations in India, including issuing targeted sanctions on government officials responsible for severe religious freedom violations, conditioning arms sales based on improved religious freedom conditions, and incorporating religious freedom priorities into bilateral meetings with Indian government counterparts.

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.

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