

INDIA 2015 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution protects freedom of religion, mandates a secular state, requires the state to treat all religions impartially, and prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion. It also states citizens must practice their faith in a way that does not adversely affect public order, morality, or health. Six out of 29 state governments had and enforced anticonversion laws. In clashes with Sikhs protesting the desecration of their holy book by unknown assailants, police killed two protesters, and 80 others were injured. Police disrupted church services and arrested Christians on charges of forced conversions and disturbing the peace. Minority religious groups expressed concerns about government discrimination and suggestions by government officials that Hinduism should be taught in public schools. Government officials at the federal, state, and local level made discriminatory statements against members of religious minority groups. Members of minority groups who were victims of religiously motivated violence or other animus complained of police inaction regarding such incidents. Attackers frequently acted with impunity, and, according to some victims, police resisted filing criminal complaints and in several instances threatened to falsely incriminate the victims. In February Prime Minister Narendra Modi pledged he would ensure “complete freedom of faith” in the country.

There were reports of religiously motivated killings, assaults, riots, coerced religious conversions, actions restricting the right of individuals to change religious beliefs, discrimination, and vandalism. Targets of killings included an intellectual advocating secular “rationalism.” Religiously motivated communal violence, including attacks by Hindus on Muslims due to alleged cow slaughter, led to deadly attacks and public rioting. Hindu nationalists threatened and assaulted Muslims and Christians and destroyed their property because of their beliefs and in disputes over the location of churches and mosques. According to the Evangelical Fellowship of India, a Christian advocacy organization, there were 177 incidents of violence, harassment, or discrimination across the country targeting Christians. Incidents included assaults on missionaries, forced conversions, and attacks on churches, schools, and private property. Muslims were also targeted based on land disputes, their traditional livelihoods selling beef or buffalo products, and social interactions with Hindus. Several well-known authors, filmmakers, and other civil society members returned national and state-sponsored awards to protest what they said was the growing religious and cultural intolerance in the country.

INDIA

Numerous senior U.S. government visitors underscored the importance of religious freedom throughout the year, including President Obama during his January visit to Delhi. The U.S. embassy and four consulates general continued to advocate for religious freedom in discussions with political leaders, state and local officials, religiously affiliated organizations, and civil society groups of all religious communities. Embassy and consulate representatives discussed reports of religious persecution and coerced religious conversions, social media-based religious intolerance, and religiously motivated attacks, as well as the U.S. response to these concerns, with these officials and leaders.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.3 billion (July 2015 estimate). According to the 2011 census, the most recent year for which disaggregated figures have been released, Hindus constitute 79.8 percent of the population, Muslims 14.2 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, and Sikhs 1.7 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Buddhists, Jains, Zoroastrians (Parsis), Jews, and Bahais. The Ministry of Tribal Affairs officially classifies the more than 104 million members of Scheduled Tribes, indigenous groups historically outside the caste system who often practice animism and indigenous religious beliefs, as Hindus in government statistics.

According to the same government estimates, there are large Muslim populations in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala; Muslims constitute the majority in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Slightly more than 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni; most of the rest are Shia. Christian populations are found across the country but in greater concentrations in the northeast, as well as in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Three small northeastern states (Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya) have large Christian majorities. Sikhs constitute the majority in Punjab. The Dalai Lama's office estimates there are significant resettled Tibetan Buddhist communities in Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, and Delhi.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

Subject to considerations of public order, morality, and health, the constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals freely to

INDIA

profess, practice, and propagate religion, and mandates a secular state. It prohibits government discrimination on the basis of religion, including with regard to employment, as well as any religiously-based restrictions on individuals' access to public or private facilities or establishments open to the general public. The constitution states religious groups have the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes, manage their own affairs in religious matters, and own, acquire, and administer property. It prohibits compelling anyone to pay taxes to promote or maintain any specific religion. National and state laws make freedom of religion "subject to public order, morality, and health."

There are laws restricting religious conversion in six of the 29 states: Arunachal Pradesh, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh. There is no implementing legislation for Arunachal Pradesh's anticonversion law. Gujarat mandates prior permission from the district magistrate for any form of conversion and punishes forced conversions with up to three years' imprisonment and a fine up to 50,000 rupees (\$756). Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh prohibit religious conversion by the use of "force," "allurement," or "fraudulent means" and require district authorities be informed of any conversions one month in advance. Violations are subject to fines and other penalties.

Himachal Pradesh and Odisha maintain similar prohibitions against conversion through force, inducement, or fraud and bar individuals from abetting such conversions. In Himachal Pradesh, penalties are up to two years' imprisonment and/or fines of 25,000 rupees (\$378). Punishments are harsher for conversions involving minors, Scheduled Tribe or Scheduled Caste members (historically disadvantaged groups also known as Dalits), or, in the case of Odisha, women. The law in Odisha requires individuals who wish to convert to another religion, and clergy intending to officiate in a conversion ceremony, to make a formal notification to the government; it also requires district magistrates to maintain a list of religious organizations and individuals engaged in proselytism.

Under Andhra Pradesh law, authorities may prohibit proselytizing near a place of worship of another religion. Punishment for violations can include imprisonment for up to three years and fines of up to 5,000 rupees (\$76).

Federal law empowers the government to ban religious organizations that provoke intercommunal tensions, are involved in terrorism or sedition, or violate laws governing foreign contributions.

INDIA

The federal penal code criminalizes “promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion,” as well as “acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony,” which includes acts that cause injury or harm to religious groups and members. The penal code also prohibits “deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.” Violations of any of these provisions are punishable by imprisonment for up to three years, a fine, or both. If the offense is committed at a place of worship, imprisonment may be for up to five years.

There are no requirements for registration of religious groups. In all states, however, federal law requires religiously affiliated organizations to maintain audit reports on their accounts and a schedule of their activities and to provide these to state government officials upon request.

The constitution states any reference to Hinduism is construed as containing a reference to Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Subsequent legislation recognizes Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism as separate religions. State governments have the power to grant minority status to religious groups that are minorities in a particular region and designate them as minorities under the law in that state. Federal law provides minority community status for six religious groups: Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Jains, and Buddhists. The constitution states the government will protect the existence of religious minorities and encourage conditions for the promotion of their individual identities.

“Personal status laws” are applicable only to certain religious communities in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance. The government grants significant autonomy to personal status law boards in drafting these laws. Law boards are selected by community leaders; there is no formal process and selection varies across communities. Hindu, Christian, Parsi, and Islamic personal status laws are legally recognized and judicially enforceable. These laws, however, do not supersede national- and state-level legislative powers or constitutional provisions. If the law boards cannot offer satisfactory solutions, the case is referred to the civil courts.

Federal law permits interreligious couples to marry without religious conversion. Interreligious couples, as all couples marrying in a civil ceremony, are required to provide public notice 30 days in advance, including addresses, photographs, and religious affiliation, for public comment. Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, or Jains who

INDIA

marry outside their religions, however, face the possibility of losing their property inheritance rights under those communities' laws.

The law recognizes the registration of Sikh marriages. There are no divorce provisions for Sikhs in the personal status laws, however, and other Sikh matters still fall under Hindu codes. Any person, irrespective of religion, may seek a divorce in civil court under Indian law.

Twenty-four of the 29 states have imposed full to partial restrictions and penalties on the slaughter of bovines. Penalties vary among states, and may also vary based on whether the animal is a cow, calf, bull, or ox. In the majority of the 24 states where bovine slaughter is banned, punishments range from six months' to two years' imprisonment and/or a fine of 1,000 to 10,000 rupees (\$15 to \$151). Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir penalize cow slaughter with imprisonment of two to 10 years. On March 2, the Maharashtra state government banned cow and calf slaughter as well as the sale, possession, transport, and consumption of beef; anyone found to be selling or in possession of beef can be jailed for five years and fined 10,000 rupees (\$151).

The constitution prohibits religious instruction in government schools. The law permits private religious schools.

Federal law regulates foreign contributions to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including faith-based organizations. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) requires designated organizations to receive prior permission by the central government before accepting foreign funding; the MHA may reject an application if the MHA judges the recipient to be "engaged in creating communal tensions or disharmony," or harmful or injurious acts knowingly targeted against religious or linguistic minorities; or if the MHA judges the contribution would contribute to such communal tensions or disharmony.

The National Commission for Minorities, which includes representatives from the five designated religious minorities and the National Human Rights Commission, is tasked with investigating allegations of religious discrimination. The Ministry of Minority Affairs may also conduct investigations. These bodies launch investigations on the basis of written complaints by plaintiffs charging criminal or civil violations and submit their findings to law enforcement agencies for action.

INDIA

The constitution allows affirmative action for the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe communities, and the law subsequently added the “Other Backward Class” (castes deemed to be socially and educationally disadvantaged) category to those groups eligible for affirmative action. Since the constitution specifies no one who is not a Hindu, Sikh, or Buddhist shall be deemed a member of a Scheduled Caste, such affirmative action benefits only include Christian and Muslim groups who would otherwise have been considered members of the Scheduled Caste community due to their social and economic status.

The government requires foreign missionaries of any religious group to obtain a missionary visa.

Government Practices

Police clashes with Sikh protesters in Punjab led to the death of two protesters. Police arrested Christians under charges of forced conversions and disrupting the peace. Legal cases related to religiously-motivated violence and riots continued to go forward. Local authorities disrupted church services and exercised control over events organized by Christian groups. The central government declined to restore or pay compensation for religious buildings damaged in communal riots taking place in past years. Religious groups expressed concern about statements by certain government officials suggesting Hinduism should be taught in schools. They also complained about police inaction in incidents of violence or hostility against their members and unequal application of some laws by the government. Religious groups reported incidents of hate speech by government officials. On several occasions, such as at a meeting in February with Christians in New Delhi, Prime Minister Modi publicly stated he would defend religious freedom.

In October during widespread and violent protests by Sikhs against the Punjab government, police fired on protesters, killing two and injuring 80. The protests occurred in five districts of Punjab after reports of incidents of desecration of the Sikh holy book by unknown assailants. By year’s end, an investigation was ongoing, and police had arrested more than a dozen protesters on charges of attempted murder, damaging public property, and carrying illegal arms.

Christians who reported that they were victims of religiously-motivated violence or other animus voiced concern about the lack of police action against such incidents, as well as of hostility by the police towards Christians. According to the All India Christian Council and the Evangelical Fellowship of India, police resisted filing

INDIA

criminal complaints and had in several instances threatened falsely to incriminate the victims.

In October police arrested three workers of the Gospel Echoing Missionary Society (GEMS), a Christian group, in the state of Madhya Pradesh under anticonversion laws as they prepared to show a gospel film. Members of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), a Hindu nationalist organization, had complained about their activities. According to a report by AsiaNews, a Catholic news agency, citing Catholic Archbishop of Bhopal Leo Cornelio, police beat the workers before releasing them on bail the following evening. According to the same report, the archbishop and the president of the Global Council of Indian Christians accused the police of arresting the individuals without any investigation. The three arrested faced trial in a local court.

On September 6, police arrested two Christians in Seoni, Madhya Pradesh under the Madhya Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act on charges of coercing people to convert to Christianity. Police later released them on bail.

In July police arrested Reverend Timothy Chaitanya Murmu, a Pentecostal minister in the village of Manohar in Odisha, and charged him with forced conversions after he baptized 16 members of Scheduled Tribes. According to the indictment, he induced them to embrace Christianity in exchange for money.

On October 23, an Ahmedabad district magistrate court ordered an inquiry a day after 90 members of Scheduled Castes converted to Buddhism at a program in Dholka town in Gujarat. According to the court, those performing the conversion ceremony had not obtained prior permission from district authorities as required by Gujarati law.

According to press reports, police arrested 14 evangelical Christians on October 6 on charges of disrupting the peace in Madhya Pradesh. The All India Christian Council had reported that prior to the incident, on September 6, local Hindus had threatened the pastor, Suresh Mandloi, and other evangelicals and told them not to hold prayer meetings in the village. According to the council, the pastor decided not to conduct the prayer service, but when the church members gathered to pray in the absence of the pastor, a crowd of more than 150 people attacked them.

In October the Chhattisgarh High Court ruled that the resolutions passed by approximately 50 village councils in Bastar district between May and July 2014

INDIA

banning non-Hindu religious “propaganda,” prayers, and speeches in their villages did not block non-Hindus’ fundamental constitutional right to preach and propagate religion.

There was slow progress in several court cases related to 1984 communal violence in New Delhi that resulted in the deaths of more than 3,000 people, mostly Sikhs. Civil society activists and Sikh advocacy groups continued to express concern about the government’s failure to hold accountable those responsible. On October 6, the Delhi High Court refused to extend interim bail granted to a convict serving a life term for the 1984 violence.

Hundreds of legal cases related to the burning of a train and subsequent violence in Godhra, Gujarat in 2002, which resulted in the deaths of more than a thousand Muslims and Hindus, remained pending. An appeal by Zakia Jafri against a Gujarat High Court judgment not to pursue charges against state officials for their alleged role in the violence remained pending.

Fast-track courts assembled for the purpose of trying cases related to 2008 anti-Christian violence in Kandhamal, Odisha continued to hear cases but did not issue any verdicts during the year. According to the All India Christian Council, a total of 255 court cases pertaining to the Kandhamal violence remained pending. On September 8, some of the Christian survivors of the Kandhamal violence held a press conference in New Delhi to discuss their fear of persecution. A day earlier, the survivors, under the auspices of the Kandhamal Committee for Peace and Justice, had met with President Pranab Mukherjee.

On September 11, the Supreme Court asked the central government, the Maharashtra state government, and the National Investigation Agency (NIA) to respond after a petitioner requested intervention in the name of the protection of public interest for a fair trial in the 2008 Malegaon, Maharashtra bombing, which targeted the local Muslim community, killing six people. Rohini Salian, the special public prosecutor, filed an affidavit with the Bombay High Court, in which the prosecutor named the NIA official who asked her to “go soft” in the prosecution. Salian, in press interviews, stated some NIA officials pressured her to act in favor of the Hindu suspects but not the Muslim suspects in this case or in the previous 2006 Malegaon bombings which targeted the same Muslim community, killing 37 and injuring 125. Police reportedly suspected Hindu nationalist groups were behind both bombings.

INDIA

On January 27, the Supreme Court issued a notice to the Madhya Pradesh government, the Central Bureau of Investigation, and former state Revenue Minister Kamal Patel regarding the minister's alleged role in the anti-Muslim communal riot in Harda district on September 19, 2013, in which 54 people lost their homes, property, and businesses.

On March 5, the Bombay High Court rejected a bail plea from Hindu Rashtra Sena chief Dhananjay Desai, who faced charges in the killing of Mohsin Shaik during anti-Muslim violence in Pune in 2014 that occurred after the posting of anti-Islamic messages on social media. At year's end, the trial was ongoing.

In August the central government argued before the Supreme Court that it had no obligation to restore religious buildings damaged in 2002 Gujarat communal riots and that the state government of Gujarat instead should be responsible for the restoration. The Supreme Court was hearing the Gujarat government appeal of a 2012 Gujarat High Court order to pay compensation to 535 mosques and shrines damaged in the riots.

On May 30, a three-member investigating team from the National Commission of Minorities visited Atali village in the Ballabhgarh district of Haryana, where a crowd had attacked Muslims and set 20 of their houses on fire five days earlier. The team recommended that police immediately prepare individual First Information Reports (FIR) for each victim rather than a joint FIR for all victims in order to begin criminal proceedings for each individual case to ensure that each victim received adequate compensation matching his or her particular losses. The team also asked for a fair assessment of the damage and urged the local administration to make every effort to provide adequate protection to Muslims and their property in order that victims could return to their homes. Federal Minister of State for Social Justice and Empowerment Krishan Pal said the federal government would compensate victims of the violence as soon as possible to have their houses repaired. The amount of compensation and whether it was paid could not be determined by year's end.

In July the Maharashtra Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) announced it would classify students attending madrassahs as "out of school" children and would not recognize the madrassah studies as formal education, which is constitutionally mandated for all children 6-14 years old. For students to be considered "actively enrolled," madrassahs would have to teach three nonreligious courses for each religious course, according to state requirements. This requirement applied to all religious

INDIA

schools in the state, but Muslim community leaders and educational institutions said they objected to the ruling because the officials conducted the survey of the madrassahs during the month of Ramadan, when the madrassahs were closed. Muslim community leaders stated they saw the announcement as an attempt by the state government to control madrassahs and an infringement of their constitutional right to run educational institutions of their choice.

In Chhattisgarh, the Kanker and Mahasamund district administrations directed all Christian missionary-run schools to stop using the term “father” when addressing an institution’s head and instead use the terms “*pracharya*” or “sir.” Kanker issued its order in February and Mahasamund in May. The Mahasamund official withdrew the order in the same month following negative press reports, saying the order had been made by mistake, while the Kanker district administration order remained in effect.

In May the Vadodara Municipal Corporation authorities in Gujarat reversed their earlier decision to relocate displaced Muslim families to a designated Muslim neighborhood and agreed to move the families to the area where they had previously lived. The families were eligible for government assistance after local authorities razed their homes in November 2014 as part of a slum rehabilitation program. The earlier announcement that the families would go to an exclusively Muslim neighborhood followed objections by Hindu groups and local BJP leaders to locating Muslims in Hindu neighborhoods. Some of the displaced families had refused to move to the exclusively Muslim area and had petitioned the Gujarat High Court to remain in their original neighborhoods. The Vadodara Municipal Corporation reversed its decision before the High Court could rule on the case.

The Gujarat government increased the number of Muslim-majority areas in Ahmedabad designated legally as “disturbed.” Authorities included the neighborhoods of Gulberg Society and Naroda Patiya, two of the areas worst affected by the 2002 riots. The designation required residents to obtain government permission to sell real estate through March 31, 2018. NGOs said the intent of the law was to stop the forced sales of properties in areas with communal violence, but it led to communal isolation by limiting areas where Muslims could sell property.

Religious minorities and Dalits described the passage of the Maharashtra law banning cow slaughter and beef distribution and consumption as a state

INDIA

government initiative disproportionately affecting Muslims, who have traditionally dominated the beef and buffalo meat trade.

After the September 28 Hindu mob killing of an individual accused of cow slaughter in Dadri, Uttar Pradesh, religious groups reported official hate speech against Muslims increased. Haryana Chief Minister Manohar Lal Khattar remarked, “Muslims can stay in India, but they will have to give up eating beef,” and federal Minister of Tourism Mahesh Sharma called the Dadri killing an “accident” and warned against interpreting the killings as religiously motivated. Following the incident, local police filed a final list of charges against the 19 accused and the trial was shifted to a fast track court.

Ramdas Kadam, the Maharashtra Minister for Environment and leader of the Shiv Sena political party, stated in a speech on October 22 that Muslim youth from the state’s Marathwada region were being sent to Pakistan and trained in terror activities. Kadam said, “They earn here, eat here, proliferate here, and then praise Pakistan. The members of this community should be sent to Pakistan.” In March the Shiv Sena newspaper *Saamna* expressed concern over rising numbers of Muslims and Christians and advocated compulsory family planning for those communities.

Top-level officials of the BJP at the central and state government level, as well as groups closely associated with the BJP, made statements advocating that the country should be exclusively Hindu. Chief Minister of Haryana M.L. Khattar said, “Muslims could continue to live in this country, but they would have to give up eating beef as the cow is an article of faith here.” Both Sharma and Khattar later stated the media had distorted their comments. Religious minorities expressed alarm at these statements.

In a speech at a New Delhi event honoring Indian Catholic saints on February 17, Prime Minister Modi said, “My government will ensure that there is complete freedom of faith and that everyone has the undeniable right to retain or adopt the religion of his or her choice without coercion or undue influence...My government will not allow any religious group, belonging to the majority or the minority, to incite hatred against others, overtly or covertly.” According to the British newspaper *The Guardian*, religious leaders of different faiths praised his remarks, but some members of his party stated the prime minister was “pandering” to a “secular” crowd. In interviews in May and June, according to the *Hindustan Times*, the prime minister said, “So far as the government is concerned, there is

INDIA

only one holy book, which is the constitution...” and “Our constitution guarantees religious freedom to every citizen and that is not negotiable...Any discrimination or violence against any community will not be tolerated.”

After the All India Muslim Personal Law Board objected to adoption of the Surya Namaskar sun salutation yoga posture in schools and colleges, Sadhvi Prachi, another leader of the VHP, advised Muslims to “connect themselves with the traditions of India, culture of India ... there is no need for any objection. If they are objecting then they should go to Pakistan. People who are objecting to [yoga] have no right to reside in India.”

In January Sakshi Maharaj, a BJP Member of Parliament, said Hindu women should have at least four babies to “protect the Hindu religion.”

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of religiously motivated killings, assaults, coerced religious conversions, riots, and actions restricting the right of individuals to change religious beliefs.

On August 30, unknown assailants shot and killed writer and former Vice Chancellor of the Kannada University M. M. Kalburgi. Both *Hindustan Times* and *First Post* news sources speculated he was killed for his anti-Hindu views and described Kalburgi as a “rationalist” who had spoken against what he called the Hindu practice of “idol worship.” The police arrested three members of Hindu nationalist organizations in connection with the killing.

In January more than 5,000 people attacked the majority Muslim village of Azizpur, Bihar after a young Hindu man was abducted and killed. According to press reports, the attackers set approximately 25 houses on fire, killing four Muslims. The police conducted initial investigations and made 13 arrests from the attackers’ and victims’ communities before referring the case to the Central Bureau of Investigation.

On February 15, assailants on a motorcycle shot Govind Pansare, another “rationalist” and his wife in Kolhapur, Maharashtra. Pansare was a politician and member of the Communist Party of India. He died from his injuries five days later. On September 16, the Maharashtra police arrested a member of Hindu nationalist group Sanatan Sanstha in connection with Pansare’s killing. Sanatan Sanstha had

INDIA

criticized Pansare and other “rationalists,” although at year’s end it was not clear whether the group had targeted Pansare for his beliefs.

In July in Karanja, Maharashtra, communal violence and an arson attack resulted in the death of a Muslim man. The violence began after local opposition to a marriage between a Muslim man and a Hindu woman; it was not clear if the dead man was targeted for his religion. Police arrested two suspects and enforced a curfew to contain the violence.

On September 28, in Bisara village near Dadri in Uttar Pradesh, two Hindu boys used the local temple’s public announcement system to say that a Muslim family had slaughtered a cow and eaten it. A Hindu group carrying sticks, swords, and pistols attacked Mohammad Akhlaq and his son, killing Akhlaq and seriously injuring the son. Police later confirmed that meat in Akhlaq’s refrigerator was mutton, not beef. By October 3, the police had arrested nine people in connection with the incident, including the son of a local BJP leader. Local Hindus protested the arrests, vandalizing shops and setting cars on fire. A newspaper affiliated with Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization, wrote, “Vedas [Hindu religious texts] allow the killing of the sinners.”

On October 16, local media reported a village crowd chased down a truck and beat and killed its truck driver after the Bajrang Dal – a Hindu nationalist organization – accused him of smuggling cows from Sarahan village near Shimla in Himachal Pradesh. The crowd also beat the truck’s four other occupants. Police investigated the case and reportedly arrested the four occupants of the truck under the Cow Slaughter and Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Acts after they found the truck had been used to transport cattle. Police later arrested five people suspected of involvement in the killing of the driver. The investigation continued at year’s end.

On October 9, a crowd attacked Zahid Ahmad, a Muslim, with a gasoline bomb and set his truck on fire in the Udhampur district of Jammu and Kashmir. Ahmad suffered burns on more than 60 percent of his body and died on October 18 at a Delhi hospital. The attack followed rumors that three cows had been killed in the area. Officials said tests revealed the cows had died due to food poisoning and the rumors of slaughter were created to foster communal tension in the Hindu majority area. Ahmad’s death led to several protests by Muslims in Kashmir.

On January 14, rioting crowds killed three youths, two Hindus and one Muslim, after communal clashes broke out between Hindus and Muslims in Ambeta and

INDIA

Hansot villages in Bharuch district, Gujarat over a kite-flying incident. The clashes occurred during celebrations of Makar Sankranti, a harvest festival. The People's Union for Civil Liberties, a civil liberties NGO, released a fact-finding report in response to the incident that pointed to heightened hostilities between the Muslim and Hindu communities beginning in December 2014, when people circulated provocative anti-Muslim messages over social media sites.

On May 9, Ashok Bhuria, a Hindu priest at a temple in a Muslim majority area in Nadiad town, Gujarat, shot and killed former councilor Sajid Vora, a Muslim. Buria said he acted in self defense after Vora led a group that was throwing stones at the temple. Vora and Bhuria had previously had a dispute over vehicle parking rights. The media reported the incident heightened Muslim-Hindu communal tensions. There were no reports of arrests following the incident.

According to the 2014-15 annual report of the MHA, there was a reduction in communal violence targeting religious minorities, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes over the previous year. Between April 2014 and March 2015, the MHA recorded 644 incidents in which 95 people died and 1,921 persons were injured. During the same period a year earlier, there were 823 communal incidents in which 133 persons died and 2,269 were injured. In the first six months of 2015, however, the MHA reported 330 incidents and 51 deaths, an increase over the 252 incidents and 33 deaths recorded over the same period during the previous year.

Christian communities reported an increase of harassment and violence, including physical violence, arson, desecration of churches and Bibles, and disruption of religious services. In its annual report, the Evangelical Fellowship of India documented 177 cases of physical violence, state harassment, and discrimination against Christians. Incidents included assaults on missionaries and attempts to convert them to Hinduism and attacks on Christian churches, Christians' private property, and missionary schools and institutions. The report added that local police seldom provided protection, refused to accept complaints, and rarely investigated incidents.

On July 18, the Evangelical Fellowship of India reported Hindus forcibly entered a private residence in Delhi where a prayer meeting was being led by pastors belonging to the Pentecostal Church and broke windows, vandalized the residence, and attacked parishioners. The same group attacked two pastors outside the Nihal Vihar Police Station where they went to lodge a complaint about the attack. Police detained the pastors for attempting to convert Hindus to Christianity but released

INDIA

them after the pastors signed a letter agreeing they would not return to the area. More injuries were reported the following day when the pastors and fellow Christians were again attacked while peacefully demonstrating against the inaction of the police.

On August 8, the Evangelical Fellowship of India (EFI) reported a crowd of nearly 500 Hindu villagers targeted the small Christian community at Dhanora, Chhattisgarh after its members refused to renounce Christianity. The villagers summoned the Christians to a community meeting, accused them of spreading Christianity, and told them to renounce their religion or face attack. They also reportedly threatened the Christians with expulsion from the village and told them they would not be allowed to harvest crops from their fields. By year's end, police had not filed a first information report on the incident.

On June 14, a group of approximately 30 RSS activists attacked two separate Pentecostal churches in Attingal, Kerala, as reported by the Global Council of Indian Christians. In the first incident, the RSS activists accused the officiating pastor of forcefully converting Hindus to Christianity. The attack caused injuries to the pastor and five others. In the second attack, the activists injured 10 congregants, including a physically disabled person. Kerala police arrested five members from the group of 30 activists. The case remained under investigation at year's end.

On May 25, a crowd attacked members of the Muslim community and set 20 of their houses on fire in Atali village in the Ballabgarh district of Haryana. Approximately 400 Muslims took shelter in the Ballabgarh police station compound. The media reported the cause of the confrontation was a 30-year dispute over a local mosque, which Hindus said stood on village land, while Muslims said it was on Muslim endowment property. In March the local court had ruled in favor of the Muslims' appeal to renovate the mosque, but following the violence another judge put a stay on further construction of the mosque pending a final judgment. Ten people were arrested and a trial was pending at year's end. Most of the Muslim villagers were able to return to their homes.

On October 20 in Delhi, activists from Hindu Sena, an organization that states it works for the welfare and protection of Hindus, attacked Sheikh Abdul Rashid, popularly called Engineer Rashid, an independent legislator from Jammu and Kashmir. They blackened his face with ink and motor oil. Rashid was at the Press Club of India to address a press conference on the October 9 attack on the truck

INDIA

drivers in Udhampur. Two weeks earlier, legislators in the Jammu and Kashmir Assembly had criticized him for hosting a party where he served beef in protest of the Dadri killings.

On August 25, a crowd attacked a Muslim man for speaking with his female Hindu co-worker in Mangalore. The group pulled the man out of a vehicle, stripped him to his underwear, tied him to a pole, and beat him, while documenting the incident on social media. Police arrested 15 persons for the attack but no charges had been filed by year's end.

Human rights groups in Karnataka stated the VHP and Bajrang Dal harassed Muslim buffalo meat traders in Mangalore. On July 14, Bajrang Dal activists on motorcycles intercepted a truck transporting buffaloes, reportedly for slaughter, to the Golitottu village in Dakshin Kannad district. Approximately 30 activists attacked the Muslim truck driver and two traders traveling onboard. Police filed charges of animal cruelty against the driver and traders (although transporting buffaloes is not illegal) and charges of assault against the activists.

On October 10, rumors of a cow being slaughtered triggered violence in Nagaria village of Mainpuri district in Uttar Pradesh. Protesters targeted police vehicles and set shops on fire, leaving seven policemen injured. Police arrested 21 people. A postmortem report on the cow established it had died of natural causes.

On March 20, the Evangelical Fellowship of India reported members of the Hindu Dharma Sena, a Hindu nationalist group, vandalized St. Thomas School and the neighboring St. Peter and Paul Cathedral in Jabalpur, Madhya Pradesh. They assaulted priests, broke pots, and shattered church windows. Police arrested six suspects on March 23, and a court released them on bail. The local Christian community lodged objections with authorities over the release of the suspects. There was no additional information on the case at year's end.

The VHP continued to promote its "Ghar Wapsi" ("Returning Home") program for converting individuals to Hinduism. At its annual meeting in June, the VHP stated it had prevented 48,651 Hindus from converting to other religions and helped 33,975 individuals to convert or "reconvert" to Hinduism between April 2014 and March 2015. In March Ashok Agrawal, the RSS secretary for central India, said Ghar Wapsi was a crucial campaign that RSS would continue to ensure "India's safety."

INDIA

NGOs such as Dhanak, a group that supports interfaith couples, continued to report instances of harassment of interfaith couples wishing to marry during the mandatory 30-day notice period; Hindu groups posted personal information about interreligious couples on social media websites.

Local media reported police did not allow Christians to worship in a church in the northern state of Haryana from March to July due to threats from local Hindu groups. The High Court of Chandigarh ordered on July 31 that the members of the congregation should be allowed to worship at the church. Local police, following the court's directives, allowed the Christians to congregate at the church.

According to members of the Church of North India, an evangelical missionary group, on August 2, Hindu activists disrupted a Catholic prayer service in Ghazipur, Uttar Pradesh, threatened the priest, and told him and attendees at the service to leave the area. Police did not file a case report or make any arrests.

According to the Human Rights Forum (HRF), a local NGO, a group of Hindus prevented a Catholic community from constructing a church in Malkizguda, Ranga Reddy district of Telangana in January. The HRF stated the Hindu group destroyed construction materials and threatened Christians. The NGO said the Catholic community complained to local police, which took no action in the case. Police charged two Christian youths with inciting religious hatred through religious propaganda in the same village soon after the previous incident.

In May Surat-based Hari Krishna Exports Private Limited, a diamond export firm in Gujarat, rejected Zeeshan Khan's job application with an email stating the firm only hired non-Muslims. The firm denied it discriminated on religious grounds, saying an "individual human error" led to the email reply to Khan's application. Khan later received more than a dozen other job offers after his experience with Hari Krishna Exports became public.

On October 13, the VHP put banners at more than 100 venues hosting the nine-day Hindu Navratri festival across Gujarat, declaring "This festival is for Hindus only." In Madhya Pradesh, VHP and Bajrang Dal, VHP's youth wing, guarded *garba* dance performances to deter Muslims from entering festival venues.

On May 6, Pune police arrested 20-year-old Amitesh Singh, an engineering student, after he tweeted that he would kill "around 3,000 Muslims." Although Singh apologized and removed the post, police charged him with promoting

INDIA

enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, committing a deliberate and malicious act intended to outrage religious feelings, and cyberterrorism. The case did not go to trial.

In February Bajrang Dal, the youth wing of VHP created a campaign of “Bahu Lao, Beti Bachao” (“Bring a Daughter-in-law, Save a Daughter”) in which they worked to convert Muslim brides to Hinduism in Uttar Pradesh and in one incident in West Bengal. The *Indian Express* reported this was in response to 2014 charges by some Hindu groups that Muslims engaged in a “love jihad,” a coordinated strategy by the Islamic community for Muslim men to marry women from other faiths in order to convert them to Islam. Bajrang Dal reported it suspended its campaign in July at the request of VHP and the ruling BJP, in order to avoid controversy over the issue in parliament.

On October 22, Shiv Sena chief Uddhav Thackeray, in a Dusshera rally speech, said India should be declared a “Hindu country.”

On April 21, after a church was attacked in Agra, the media reported that Munna Kumar Shukla, general secretary of the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (ABHM), a political interest group affiliated with the RSS, stated, “the Narendra Modi-led NDA [National Democratic Alliance] government should award and provide legal and administrative protection to Hindus who attack churches across the country. Churches are no longer places of worship, but factories for conversion of Hindus into Christianity.” Shukla said the ABHM would give awards and protection for Hindu youths who attack churches and marry Muslim girls. The *Hindu Mahasabha* newspaper said attacking a church is not “illegal” and “violates no law.”

In January vandals broke into St. Alphonsa’s Catholic Church in Delhi. The priest reported the vandals only took religious artifacts and left cash in collection boxes.

AsiaNews reported that in May suspected Hindu activists attacked the Anglican Church of St. Paul and two Protestant churches in Indore, Madhya Pradesh’s largest city. They attempted to set fire to two of the churches, although police intervened, and threw stones at the third church, breaking glass panels and windows. The Church of St. Paul reported damage to a crucifix, holy vessels, and a microphone. *AsiaNews* also reported that on May 12 Hindu activists attacked the residence of Augustinian nuns and the orphanage they ran in Pipaldhar, Madhya Pradesh, throwing stones, destroying crosses, and vandalizing objects.

INDIA

On March 6, Haryana police arrested 14 people on charges of vandalizing a church under construction in the Hisar district of Haryana. The priest stated the accused had broken a cross and raised a flag depicting Ram, a Hindu god. Investigations were ongoing and the trial had yet to begin at year's end.

Forty-one well-known authors, filmmakers, and other civil society members returned national and state-sponsored awards given by the government-sponsored Sahitya Academy (Academy of Literature) to protest what they said was the growing religious intolerance in the country and the killing of "rationalists" and secularists. The ruling BJP described the actions of the individuals returning the awards as politically motivated.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

During his January visit, at a speech at a town hall event in New Delhi, and during remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., a few weeks later, President Obama underscored the importance of religious freedom to India's success, urging it not to become "splintered along the lines of religious faith." The U.S. Special Representative to Muslim Communities also spoke on the importance of religious tolerance at a conference for countering online radicalization and recruitment to violence during his visit to Delhi in November.

The U.S. embassy and consulates general continued to advocate tolerance, pluralism, and religious freedom in discussions with the country's leadership, as well as with state and local officials. Embassy representatives met with commissioners from the National Human Rights Commission and the National Commission for Minorities to discuss government policies affecting the exercise of religious belief, particularly tolerance, in the wake of Hindu nationalist organizations' campaigns for "reconversion" and banning the eating of beef.

The embassy and consulates general continued to meet with religious organizations, missionary communities, and NGOs of all religious backgrounds to discuss religious freedom concerns and U.S. responses. These included the India Islamic Cultural Center, the All India Imams' Organization, leaders of several mosques, the Catholic Bishops Conference of India, the Church of North India, the Delhi Archdiocese, Bharatiya Sant Samiti, the Chinmaya Mission, Hindu priests, and Sikh leaders.

INDIA

The embassy continued to operate an interagency interfaith working group to promote religious freedom and tolerance. The working group established an outreach strategy, including organizing a roundtable with young religious leaders, visits by the Ambassador to various religious cultural sites, and visits by embassy representatives and visiting U.S. government officials to religious educational institutions. Embassy visitors and officials traveled to university towns, including Aligarh and Deoband, Uttar Pradesh, to discuss religious freedom with faculty, students, and community members.

The embassy and consulates general hosted celebrations marking religious holidays, including Ramadan, Holi, Eid al-Fitr, and Easter throughout the country to bring together leaders from different religious groups, and at which embassy representatives and interfaith guests spoke about religious freedom and tolerance in speeches and informal discussions. Embassy and consulate officials continued to investigate cases involving reports of religious persecution, coerced conversions, religious intolerance, and religiously motivated attacks.