

**Testimony by Isaac Six, Senior Director of Advocacy, Global Christian Relief
Before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

**Hearing on
India: Recent Human Rights Reporting**

March 21, 2024
10:00 AM
H-313, The Capitol

Oral Remarks

Thank you, Chair Smith, Chair McGovern, and the Members of the Lantos Commission for holding this hearing and for inviting Global Christian Relief to testify. The Commission is truly a beacon of light in Congress on matters of human rights, and one I'm proud to have worked for in years past.

I took this photo nearly nine years ago (**hold up image**). In the photo, a Congressional staffer and I are sitting in a dark room in a small village in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh. The room is dark on purpose: extremists had been terrorizing members of the religious minority whom we had come to interview and were threatening to return, so we conducted the interviews in secret. Some of the men in the image had been ordered to attend a Ghar Wapsi, or "homecoming" ceremony, essentially forcing them to convert to Hinduism. When they refused, they were attacked and beaten by members of the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP).

In the nine years since that photo was taken, nothing has changed. We receive more reports of attacks on religious minorities in states like Chhattisgarh and Uttar Pradesh than we can possibly publish. These reports include testimonies of forced conversions, the destruction of places of worship, kidnapping, sexual assault and sometimes fatal mob violence.

These pieces of anecdotal evidence pointing to serious religious freedom concerns are supported by a much wider body of data. For example:

- The Pew Research Center rates India in the top seven of all countries for social hostility on the basis of religionⁱ
- The United Christian Forum, a Delhi-based human rights group, documented 720 attacks on Christian minorities in just 2023ⁱⁱ
- Global Christian Relief's Violent Incident Database, launched this year to track violent incidents of persecution in every country and involving every faith community, shows violent incidents against religious minorities in India sometimes involved hundreds or even thousands of victimsⁱⁱⁱ

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Undergirding much of this violence is a pernicious legal framework that favors extremists in the religious majority. The passage and enforcement of anti-conversion laws in 12 of India's 28 states^{iv}, ostensibly to protect citizens from forced religious conversions, has in effect criminalized conversions from any faith except those into Hinduism. Hundreds of Christian leaders^v, often from Scheduled Castes and Tribes, have been arrested under these laws, and countless more attacked, for exercising the basic right to tell other people about their deeply held beliefs.

The most shocking aspect of all of this is how little any of it reflects what I believe India truly is: a beautiful, pluralistic nation where respect for other's religious beliefs is a deeply ingrained cultural value. In fact, 84% of Indian's say respecting all religions is "very important to being truly Indian."^{vi}

How do we reconcile these two seemingly contradictory positions? By recognizing that most religious violence is instigated by a small faction within Indian society. And herein also lies the answer to addressing these issues.

There is only so much that can be done from outside of India. Congress and Members of this Commission *should* apply pressure on the Biden Administration to accept USCIRF's recommendations and designate India a Country of Particular Concern. Congress and the Administration *should* identify Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe religious freedom and other human rights violations and enact targeted sanctions against those entities.

But more importantly, we must support the efforts of Indians themselves to address these issues and reconcile their differences. It must be made clear that the negative actions I've just mentioned are intended to be temporary and to go hand-in-hand with a positive offer to work together in addressing concerns. We must emphasize the longstanding values that the vast majority of Americans and Indians have shared for decades, and refuse to divide ourselves along fractious political lines, theirs or ours.

In the end, as I once heard an American Congressman say to an Indian Ambassador, "friends don't let friends commit human rights abuses." We have a responsibility to speak up, but mostly we have a responsibility to support the overwhelming majority of Indians looking for a better future. Lasting change can and will only come from them.

ⁱ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/05/globally-government-restrictions-on-religion-reached-peak-levels-in-2021-while-social-hostilities-went-down/>

ⁱⁱ <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/india/rise-in-attacks-on-christians-in-india-720-attacks-in-2023-alone-reveals-ucf-data-1.9210657>

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iii <http://vid.iirf.global/web/search/results?t=0&c=581&ini=&fin=&do=&pe=&pc=>

iv <https://www.uscirf.gov/sites/default/files/2023%20India%20Apostasy%20Issue%20Update.pdf>

v <https://releaseinternational.org/hundreds-of-christians-arrested-under-indias-anti-conversion-laws/>

vi <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/>