

Jeff King Written Testimony on Religious Freedom in India to Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

I would first like to thank the members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, and specifically the co-Chairmen, Mr. Pitts and Mr. McGovern, for hosting this important hearing and for giving me the opportunity to speak concerning the status of human rights and religious liberty in India. As the President of International Christian Concern, a non-governmental organization that exists to provide direct assistance, awareness, and advocacy to the persecuted Christian Church, we investigate and document instances of persecution around the world. India has been a focus of our organization, and a country of great concern as we see many Christians and other religious minorities facing escalating persecution for their faith.

Human rights in India, and specifically religious freedom, is predicated upon a history of stratifying individuals by social class and religion. While India claims to be a pluralistic society and has constitutional protections for religious freedom, the facts remain that religious minorities, specifically Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs, are too often victims of religious persecution including forced conversions, violent assaults, and social boycotts, which limits their access to work, as well as cultural and social services.

While the government of India is not directly involved in perpetrating these crimes, the silence of Prime Minister Modi and government authorities is deafening. India's constitution guarantees full religious freedom, including an individual's ability to freely "profess, practice and propagate religion." Despite this constitutional protection, there is little respect for the rule of law, and the government fails to enforce this right for members of India's religious minority communities. Hindu extremists, such as the RSS and its subsidiaries, the VHP and Bajrang Dal, act with impunity against religious minorities. Unfortunately, this lack of law enforcement, action, and even condemnation from the Indian government has led to an increase in instances of persecution.

Prime Minister Modi has been a lifelong member of the RSS, and his political party, the BJP, has close ties to the Hindu radical group. During his time as the chief minister of Gujarat state, the United States government denied Narendra Modi a travel visa to the US under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the only individual ever to be banned under this law. This 2005 decision was based on his failure to protect religious minorities from Hindu radical violence in Gujarat, demonstrating Modi's checkered past with religious freedom.

International Christian Concern is tracking a trend of increased attacks on Christians, and just since the beginning of 2016, we have documented 109 separate attacks on Christians and their places of worship, affecting more than 2,400 individuals. Our colleagues at the Catholic Secular Forum reported that, "There was a 20% rise in Christian persecution in 2015 with 365 major attacks, victimizing over 8,000 people from the Christian community." These incidents are not aberrations, as the BJP government has claimed, and 2015 marked the worst year for Christians in India's independent history. Despite this deplorable statistic, Modi and his administration refuse to confront the religious intolerance quickly spreading throughout his nation.

It must be noted that although these incidents of persecution have taken place in multiple areas of India, Chhattisgarh state has been at the epicenter of persecution as its Christian community has been

attacked on 21 occasions. These attacks range from vandalism of churches, to the beating of church leaders and parishioners, to entire Christian communities being socially boycotted by their Hindu neighbors. For instance, on April 17th, Pastor Sameli and his wife, Meena who was 7 months pregnant at the time, were held hostage outside of their church by two individuals demanding they worship the Hindu deity Ram. With a sword to his neck, Pastor Sameli refused. The attackers then set fire to the church while Pastor Sameli and his wife fled for their lives.

Chhattisgarh state also houses the Bastar district, an area where in June 2014 Hindu radicals convinced local community leaders to “ban any non-Hindu religious propaganda, prayers, and speeches in the village,” a practice which denies freedom of religion for over 300 Christian families in the region. For Christians living in this area, they face a stark choice of converting to Hinduism or being socially boycotted in the village in which they live. This social boycott means that Christians in many villages are no longer allowed to access water wells, purchase goods at local stores, work and receive pay, cultivate their fields, graze their livestock, or even talk to Hindu members of their village without being assaulted or fined.

A local pastor explained what the Christian community faces in Bastar by saying, “Attacks on Christians take place on a daily basis. Every day we hear about Christians being attacked, some incidents are more cruel than others. These attacks we face from Hindu hardline groups are simply because we practice the Christian faith. Particularly Christians who live in rural areas are more vulnerable and face more frequent attacks; however, these attacks do not get the attention of the media and civil society. Victims don’t get justice from concerned authorities.”

Most recently, a 22-year-old woman was brutally attacked by activists of the VHP on May 22, 2016 for practicing Christianity in Parapur, a village in the Bastar district. She was dragged from the field where she was working after attending Sunday worship services and beaten until she lost consciousness. Through the pressure of Christians on the local police, first information report #27/16 was filed, but no arrests have been made to date. This is just one example of the many attacks that have taken place in Bastar.

In October 2015, the Chhattisgarh High Court ruled that the outlawing of non-Hindu religion is unconstitutional. Despite this ruling, the spread of these resolutions in Chhattisgarh, and the practice of social boycott against Christians, has continued to this day.

Just recently in April 2016, the villages of Bade Themli and Karimeri passed resolutions banning the practice of non-Hindu religions, despite the ruling from the High Court. In spite of thousands of Indian citizens in Chhattisgarh being denied their constitutional rights, Prime Minister Modi continues to ignore these clear constitutional violations. This denial of religious freedom over the last two years has coincided with Modi’s tenure in power.

Members of India’s Muslim population have also faced religious persecution. In September 2015, Mohammed Saif, a 52-year-old Muslim man, was brutally murdered by a mob of angry Hindus who accused him of slaughtering a cow, an animal considered sacred by many Hindus. Six weeks later, another Muslim, Mohammed Hasmal Ali, was accused of stealing a cow and was killed by another mob. These murders came at a time when Modi’s political party, BJP, were aggressively pushing beef bans at the state level. In addition, the BJP ran campaigns ads accusing its political opponents of “insulting the holy cow.”

Further evidence of the lack of respect for religious liberty and human rights is India's denial of travel visas to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). This is the third time that the Indian government has failed to provide travel visas for USCIRF to investigate religious tolerance throughout India. Then Chairman of USCIRF, Robert P. George, stated of the visa denial, "USCIRF has been able to travel to many countries, including those that are among the worst offenders of religious freedom, including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, China, and Burma. One would expect that the Indian government would allow for more transparency than have these nations, and would welcome the opportunity to convey its views directly to USCIRF."

In addition to the culture of impunity that has been allowed to persist, BJP leaders and their ideological allies have actively participated in the propagation of intolerance against India's religious minorities. In January of 2015, a BJP Member of the Parliament, stated, "Wait for some time. A law will be passed in Parliament in which anyone indulging in cow slaughter and conversion will be punished with the death sentence."

Mahesh Sharmah, a Federal Minister in Modi's cabinet stated that the Bible and Quran are, "not central to the soul of India in the same way as Gita and Ramayana are."

Sadhvi Deva Thakur, an ideological adherent to extreme Hindu nationalism, demanded "The population of Muslims and Christians is growing day by day. To rein in this, [central government] will have to impose emergency [actions], and Muslims and Christians will have to be forced to undergo sterilization so that they can't increase their numbers." She went on to say that statues of Hindu gods and goddesses should be placed in mosques and churches.

These quotes clearly display the attitude of some BJP members and their allies seeking to coalesce political power through religiously charged statements. Extremist views like these were not confronted nor condemned by Modi or his administration, further cultivating the growing intolerance that persists within India.

It is my sincere hope and prayer that the ongoing efforts of this Commission, of International Christian Concern, and of the many other organizations working to draw attention to these issues will encourage the Indian government to first, acknowledge that these problems exist, and then to take concrete action to enforce the full religious freedom that is meant to be guaranteed by its constitution. Thank you again to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for bringing awareness to this critical issue, and for the opportunity to provide testimony.