

World Watch Research

India:

Background Information

September 2024



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Serving persecuted **Christians** worldwide

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Copyright and sources

World Watch Research has divided up the previously named Full Country Dossier into two separate documents:

- Background country information (published annually in summer)
- Persecution dynamics (published annually in January).

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Map of country



India: Population (UN estimate for 2024)	Christians	Chr%
1,441,720,000	73,233,000	5.1

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Recent history

From 1920 onwards, nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi led non-violent protests against British colonial rule which eventually led to independence in 1947, which is also when Muslim majority Pakistan split off as a separate nation. In 1971 war over East Pakistan led to the creation of Bangladesh.

Since the 1990s India has also taken a much more assertive role in world politics and has attempted to become one of the new superpowers. India is a member of a group of countries called BRICS (i.e. Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) that seeks to become an alternative to Western dominated global politics and economy. India possesses nuclear technology and has even launched its own Mars probe.

Another feature that has changed in India over the last few decades is a notable decrease in the level of religious tolerance. Traditionally, Hinduism and Buddhism (both originating in India) used to be regarded as peaceful religions. Since the 1990s, Hinduism has taken on a much more aggressive character. Tolerance towards dissent, minorities, or respecting religious and cultural diversity has dwindled. A substantial part of the population sympathizes with authoritarian leadership. Such leadership does not shy away from imposing its will on opponents by violent means.

Since May 2014, India is governed by the hardline Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Modi had a reputation for failing to prevent atrocities committed by radical Hindus when he was Chief Minister of Gujarat State in 2002, in which hundreds (if not thousands) of Muslims died in pogroms. Since May 2014, the level of intolerance in India has increased and hundreds of violent incidents against Christians have been recorded each year.

In the May 2019 elections, the BJP gained an even greater majority in parliament. This meant the Modi government stayed in power and that violent incidents against Christians continued unabated.

In May 2021, [hundreds of corpses](#), many suspected to be victims of COVID-19, were found left along riverbanks in northern India (HRW, 20 May 2021). Villagers indicated that fear of the disease and lack of funds to cremate were likely reasons for families to leave their dead. The abandoned corpses discovered near the Ganges in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar states raised serious questions about the accuracy of official COVID-19 statistics and would seem to be a clear indication of the spread of the pandemic in rural areas, where health infrastructure is still extremely weak, and containment measures were hindered by limited testing capacity, stigma, and low vaccination rates. According to Matters India reporting on 2 June 2021, [1.21 million](#) Indians are estimated to have died from COVID-19 related causes.

In October 2021 [a row erupted](#) in India over the use of Israeli spyware named Pegasus (NDTV, 27 October 2021) The government of Prime Minister Modi was accused of acting like Big Brother to put everyone under surveillance.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, [India did not join](#) in the international condemnation of Russia's action, making clear it did not want to take sides. India did not want to be weakened, needing its long-standing reliance on Russian military equipment to continue (BBC News, 13 May 2022).

On 3 May 2023, the northeastern state of Manipur was thrown into [state-wide ethno-religious violent conflict](#) between the majority Meitei tribe (a mix of Hindu, Christian and Sanamahi Meiteis) and the

minority (largely Christian) Kuki-Zo tribe. The violence started after the High Court of Manipur was due to recognize Meitei as a Scheduled Tribe which would enable the latter to inhabit hill territories in addition to reservations in public jobs and education. The Kuki-Zo and other scheduled tribes protested, including engaging in arson and vandalism in the capital city of Imphal. This protest was soon followed by ethnic-motivated attacks on Kuki-zo by Meitei militants. As of August 2023, the violence has resulted in at least 220 deaths and the displacement of 67,000 people according to government data, although the real numbers are likely to be much higher. More than 3,000 weapons and 600,000 rounds of ammunition have been looted from the barracks of security forces by militants. (Al Jazeera, 9 August, 2023)

When Hamas conducted a terrorist attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, it was followed by a large scale military attack by Israel on Gaza in an attempt to wipe out Hamas. The attacks continue to result in the deaths of thousands of civilians. Although the Hindutva movement has always supported Israel on social media, the official position of the Indian government is one of neutrality. The Indian government has [re-iterated](#) its demand to bring an end to the violence (The Hindu, 9 April 2024).

In the May-June general elections of 2024, the BJP failed to achieve a simple majority (272) and was reduced to 240 seats. Although BJP was the single largest party and formed the government and Narendra Modi became the prime minister for the third consecutive time, his government is now dependent on the support of allies in order to rule. In the weeks following Modi's government formation, there have been a [series of mob lynchings](#) against Muslim youth and a continuation of persecution against Christians. The persistence of lynchings and other forms of vigilante violence indicate that even an electorally weakened BJP can no longer control the various RSS-affiliated organizations responsible for most mob violence against religious minorities on the ground (Al-Jazeera, 25 June, 2024).

Political and legal landscape

India is the seventh largest country in the world and the most populous. Officially known as the Republic of India, it is a complex political entity. It is a federation with a central government in New Delhi which controls foreign affairs, the armed forces and the economy. The country consists of 28 states and 8 union territories (areas ruled by the central government with effect from 31 October 2019).

The political atmosphere of India is multi-faceted as is its religious landscape. The political table of India has many chairs round it, where secular, Hindu nationalist, socialist and communist politicians sit together. On various occasions, several political adversaries have come together to form a coalition government at State or Central level. At the current time, Hindu nationalists are very powerful.

The Constitution of India declares the country to be a secular state. Hindu radicals are calling to change this and make Hinduism the national religion. They also want to impose anti-conversion legislation at the national level, but for this a two-thirds majority in parliament is needed.

Anti-conversion laws

India's Freedom of Religion Acts or "anti-forced-conversion" laws are state-level statutes that have been enacted to regulate religious conversions. Anti-conversion laws exist in eleven states: Odisha (1967), Madhya Pradesh (1968), Arunachal Pradesh (1978), Chhattisgarh (2000/2006), Gujarat (2003),

Himachal Pradesh (2006/2019), Jharkhand (2017), Uttarakhand (2018), Uttar Pradesh (2020), Haryana (2022) and Karnataka (2022). The anti-conversion law in Arunachal Pradesh has not been fully implemented due to a lack of subsidiary rules; and the state of Rajasthan passed an anti-conversion bill, but it has yet to be signed by the President of India to make it law. The anti-conversion law in Karnataka is earmarked for [revision or withdrawal](#) in 2023/2024 (WWR, 19 June 2023).

There is also the [Indian Penal Code-295-A](#) (accessed 29 June 2022) which is a highly misused law against Christians. While there are some variations between the state laws, they are very similar in content and structure. All of the laws seek to prevent anyone from making or attempting to make another person change their religion (either directly or otherwise) through “forcible” or “fraudulent” means, or by “allurement” or “inducement.” However, even in the states where this law has not been implemented, police have arrested Christians for evangelistic activities.

In May 2019, new parliamentary elections were held in India and the support for Prime Minister Modi increased even further with the BJP gaining an absolute majority. Consequently, it was no longer necessary for the BJP to form a coalition with other parties (and thus to accept compromises). It was therefore clear that Muslims and Christians would not experience any improvement in their situation.

In August 2019, the Modi government decided to remove Article 370 from the state of Jammu & Kashmir – this article provided an exemption to the state from the Indian Constitution. The government decided to do this to put an end to the Muslim insurgency that has been going on in Jammu & Kashmir for decades. The decision to end to the special status was an important event in Indian history. Article 35-A was removed as well, which allowed the state to have the prerogative on citizenship. The process was conducted with heavy military deployment in the state. After the bill was passed in parliament, Jammu & Kashmir lost its state status and was split up into two so-called Union Territories named Jammu & Kashmir and Leh & Ladakh. The central government in New Delhi has much more power in Union Territories than in states. As a result, India now has 28 states.

Three other major policy agendas of the BJP also deserve attention: The Citizenship Amendment Act, the Uniform Civil Code and the revised penal codes:

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)

The CAA was passed by Parliament on 11 December 2019. It amended the Citizenship Act of 1955 by providing accelerated pathway to Indian citizenship for persecuted religious minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and India. The CAA 2019 drew criticism because it defined persecuted religious minorities in these countries as Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Jains, Parsis and Buddhists, but excluded Muslims. Following countrywide protests, the government of India postponed implementation of the CAA. With elections fast approaching in April or May 2024, there are reports that the BJP might implement the CAA to seek [electoral benefits](#) (ABP News, 3 January 2024).

The Uniform Civil Code (UCC)

The UCC is a long-standing proposal from the BJP (with support from some other political parties) since the 1980s. It seeks to formulate and implement personal laws of citizens that would apply to all citizens regardless of their religion. Personal laws cover marriage, divorce, adoption, inheritance and maintenance. Currently personal laws for various groups are governed by their respective religious scriptures. Religious minorities and indigenous communities are expected to be impacted the most if

the UCC will be implemented. The BJP governed state of Uttarakhand is due to [roll out the UCC in January 2024](#) soon followed by its implementation in Gujarat which is also a BJP governed state (The New Indian Express, 14 January 2024). It is suspected that if BJP wins the general elections of 2024, UCC will be implemented across the country.

According to the [US State Department \(IRFR 2023 India\)](#):

- “The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and the right of all individuals to freely profess, practice, and propagate religion; mandates a secular state; requires the state to treat all religions impartially; and prohibits discrimination based on religion. It also states citizens must practice their faith in a way that does not adversely affect public order, morality, or health. Ten of 28 states have laws restricting religious conversions for all faiths.”
- “Ten of the country’s 28 states –Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttarakhand, and Uttar Pradesh – have laws restricting religious conversion by misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion, allurement, fraud, or marriage (done for the sole purpose of unlawful conversion). Under these anti-conversion laws, prohibited forms of religious allurement for conversion include the provision of gifts, promises of a better life, free education, and other standard charitable activities. These laws also bar individuals from abetting such conversions. The laws in those 10 states also require individuals wishing to convert to another religion and clergy intending to officiate at a conversion ceremony to submit formal notification to the state government for public notice, and this reporting requirement has reportedly been applied to rites such as baptisms. The notification procedures require state police to determine if there are objections to the conversion. For many of these laws, the burden of proof to demonstrate that a religious conversion was not affected through misrepresentation, force, coercion, or other prohibited manner lies on the person accused of the conversion, rather than the accuser. Violators of anti-conversion laws are subject to imprisonment or fines.”
- “The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) requires religious groups and other NGOs that receive foreign funding to be licensed by the Ministry of Home Affairs before accepting or transferring foreign funds. This license must be renewed every five years. Federal law further requires NGOs that are registered under the law, including religious organizations, to maintain audit reports for their accounts and a schedule of their activities and to provide these to state government officials upon request. The central government may reject a license application or a request to transfer funds if it judges the recipient to be acting against “harmony between religious, racial, social, linguistic, or regional groups, castes, or communities.”
- “The constitution prohibits religious instruction in government schools. The law permits private religious schools. The law permits some Muslim, Christian, Sindhi (Hindu refugees), Parsi, and Sikh educational institutions that receive government support to set quotas for students belonging to the religious minority in question.”

According to [USCIRF 2024 India](#) CPC:

- “In 2023, religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate. The government, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), reinforced discriminatory nationalist policies, perpetuated

hateful rhetoric, and failed to address communal violence disproportionately affecting Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, Jews, and Adivasis (indigenous peoples). Continued enforcement of the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA), Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA), Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), and anti-conversion and cow slaughter laws resulted in the arbitrary detention, monitoring, and targeting of religious minorities and those advocating on their behalf."

Christians do not have a major political party of their own (barring a few attempts in Andhra Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh). Christians can only join existing parties. It may come as a surprise that some of them have even joined the BJP. In fact, many Christians voted for Modi because they liked his economic agenda and hoped that he would do away with the inertia that characterized the Manmohan Singh era. Christians are also hardly present in the judicial body.

Gender perspective

Under India's pluralistic legal system, marriage laws vary according to religion. In addition to Hindu, Muslim and Christian legislation, the Special Marriage Act (1954) provides a means of citizens getting married irrespective of religious background. However, a controversial new anti-conversion law that criminalizes interfaith relationships has put couples on edge in certain states, primarily Hindu-Muslim couples ([BBC News, 15 March 2021](#)).

Under the Special Marriage Act, forced marriages and child marriages are outlawed. Early marriages nonetheless remain widespread, and reportedly spiked in the context of COVID-19 ([Al-Jazeera, 14 April 2021](#)). According to [Girls Not Brides India](#) (accessed 9 August 2024), 23% of Indian girls are married before they reach 18 years of age. Divorce laws also vary in accordance with the relevant religious or civil law that the marriage occurred under. Under Christian and Muslim laws, a man is entitled to divorce his wife for any reason, whereas both genders have equal rights to file for divorce under the Special Marriage Act and Hindu Marriage Act.

India signed the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and ratified it in 1993. A [2014 review](#) by the CEDAW committee highlighted a culture of impunity for perpetrators of violence against women (CEDAW, 2014, p.3). It further observed an increase in violent crimes against women, especially rape (including marital), kidnappings and abductions. Such issues remain widely reported ([BBC News, 16 December 2021](#)).

Female representation in Parliament in 2021 was 14.4%. Whilst modest, this represents a 9.4% rise from just 5% in 1990 ([Index Mundi](#), last accessed 4 July 2023), and compared to other countries in the region, women are broadly accepted as high-profile political leaders ([Pew Research Centre, 2 March 2022](#)). In September 2023, the Modi government passed a bill in the lower house ensuring [one-third reservation for women members](#) of lower house of parliament at both state and central level. The reservation for women is due to come into effect in 2029 (The Hindu, 20 September, 2023).

Rising violence against women

A report by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reveals that violence and [crimes against women](#) have risen by 4% in 2022 compared to 2021 (Frontline, 6 December 2023). In 2021 there were 4,28,278 and in 2022, there were 4,45,256 cases. Cruelty by Husband or his relatives (31.4%), Kidnapping and

Abduction (19.2%), Assault (18.7%) and Rape (7.1%) were the significant categories noted in the report.

Religious landscape

India: Religious context	Number of adherents	%
Christians	73,233,000	5.1
Muslim	198,517,000	13.8
Hindu	1,053,400,000	73.1
Buddhist	11,978,000	0.8
Ethnic religionist	44,804,000	3.1
Jewish	4,800	0.0
Bahai	2,720,000	0.2
Atheist	2,754,000	0.2
Agnostic	21,866,000	1.5
Other	32,441,500	2.3
<i>OTHER includes Chinese folk, New religionist, Sikh, Spiritist, Taoist, Confucianist, Jain, Shintoist, Zoroastrian.</i>		

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

The last census held by the government of India was in 2011. The decennial census due in 2021 was postponed because of the COVID-19 crisis and is now due only in 2025. The postponement of the census has impacted governance and welfare schemes since population numbers are outdated.

As can be seen in the table above, according to World Christian Database estimates (accessed May 2024), 1,053 million citizens are Hindus (73.1% of the population), 198 million are Muslims (13.8% of the population), over 73 million are Christians (5.1% of the population).

Hinduism has dominated India for centuries; it started to develop between 500 and 300 BC. The second biggest religion in India is Islam. 13.8% may seem to be a fairly insignificant minority before realizing that India is the country with the third largest Muslim population on earth - only Indonesia and Pakistan have a greater number of Muslim citizens.

Christianity is the third largest religion in India. The group of Christians in India growing fastest are the non-traditional Christian communities (including converts to Christianity). Bureaucracy and corruption are well-known factors all over India: If Christians try to build a new church, or renovate an existing one, they will encounter much red-tape and opposition. The only way to bypass the obstacle of bureaucracy is by paying bribes. Many staff in lower administrative posts have low incomes and seek

extra income from corruption to survive. Christians in India are constantly encountering these obstacles in almost every aspect of their lives.

The fourth largest religious group in India are adherents of so-called Ethno-religionism. These are the traditional tribal religions, which predate the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism in the country. Sikhs (mainly living in the state of Punjab in India's northwest), are the next largest group. Buddhists only make up 0.8% of the country's population. Buddhism originated in ancient India sometime between the 6th and 4th centuries BC, from where it spread through much of Asia.

Economic landscape

According to [World Bank Macro Poverty Outlook India – April 2024](#):

- **GDP (current US\$) (billions):** 3610.5 (2023)
- **GDP per capita (current US\$):** 2527.2 (2023)
- **Economic growth:** "Between 2000 and 2019, India's economy grew by 6.6 percent annually on average; per capita GDP doubled, and the extreme poverty rate decreased from 40 percent in 2004 to 13.2 percent in 2019. ... Growth is projected to reach 7.5 percent in FY23/24. ... Growth is expected to decelerate to 6.6 percent in FY24/25, before picking up in subsequent years."
- **Inflation:** "Inflation is expected to fall to 5.5 percent in FY23/24. Core inflation fell below 4 percent, while food inflation remained around 8 percent as of February 2024."

India is the world's 7th-largest economy by market exchange rates. But the new wealth is not distributed equally and the gap between very rich and very poor is growing rapidly. Despite the economic growth, poverty is extremely high (see below: *Social and cultural landscape*).

The economy of India stands on 4 pillars: Agriculture, Unorganized sector, Organized or core sector and Micro Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME). All four sectors together contribute more than 90% to the GDP of India. On 8 November 2016, the Government of India announced the demonetization of all 500 and 1,000 rupee banknotes of the Mahatma Gandhi series. It also announced the issuance of new 500 and 2,000 rupee banknotes in exchange for the demonetized banknotes. It was enacted by the single-handed decision of Prime Minister Modi. It resulted in a steep decline in all sections of Indian economy; however, the Unorganized sector (which makes up 42% of GDP) suffered most. Millions of jobs were lost and recession has struck the nation. It pushed 520 million people 'Below Poverty Line' (BPL). Most of rural Christians are already under BPL.

At the end of August 2019, media outlets published reports based on a Reuters study, showing that the Indian economy was [continuing to contract](#) (Asia News, 30 August 2019) and had hit its lowest recorded level for the past five years, According to experts, in the April-June 2019 quarter, the increase in GDP was 'only' 5.7%: far lower than the same period in 2018, when growth was 8%, thus losing its place as the world's fastest growing economy.

The crisis surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic also had a huge impact on the Indian economy in 2020 and 2021. As society went into lockdown, many businesses had to stop their work, causing many people to lose their jobs and income. The Indian economy shrank 23.9% year-on-year in the second quarter of 2020, much worse than market forecasts of an 18.3% drop. This was the biggest contraction on record, caused by India imposing a nationwide lockdown in late March 2020 and extending it several times, thus halting most economic activities. IMF projected India's GDP would [plunge by 10.3%](#) in the

fiscal year ending on 31 March 2021, the biggest contraction since the country became independent in 1947 (The New Indian Express, 13 October 2020).

In June 2021, BBC News published [a skeptical analysis](#) of India's economy under Prime Minister Modi. The analysis shows that Asia's third-largest economy is not doing well at all, and this is only partly due to COVID-19 measures. The pandemic battered what was an already under-par performance. Mismanagement was also a very important factor (BBC News, 22 June 2021). As in many other countries, food and fuel costs began soaring in 2022. At the beginning of May 2022, India's central bank announced its first interest rate hike in two years in an attempt to slow inflation.

While the landmark '2009 Right to Education Act' (which made education free and compulsory for children between 6 and 14) has decreased the percentage of children out of school, many children – particularly girls – receive little education. However, the Christian community in India is the second most literate community in India; at the same time, it is the [largest unemployed group](#) among all minorities in India. Christians are further facing daily challenges of discrimination, inadequate public healthcare and malnutrition. Many churches lack the finances to do anything about this. They need assistance from abroad to run social projects etc. but the government restrictions make this virtually impossible. The work of Christian NGOs has suffered from the fact that it has been made very difficult (if not impossible) to receive financial support from abroad.

Gender perspective

Economic pressures restrict the freedom of Christians, especially converts. Reports indicate that Christian men have experienced harassment within their workplace, or even lost their jobs due to their Christian faith. The loss of income affects their dependent family. Female Christians are additionally economically vulnerable on the grounds of their gender, due to lower education and employment rates for women and girls, and patrilineal inheritance practices ([The Conversation, 6 January 2021](#)). Sexual harassment at work also remains an entrenched problem. As women primarily work in the informal labor market, thousands missed out on emergency cash transfers during the COVID-19 pandemic, as they did not have a bank account ([GIWPS 2021](#), Overview, p.8).

Social and cultural landscape

According to the [World Factbook India](#), accessed 9 August 2024:

- **Main ethnic groups:** Indo-Aryan 72%, Dravidian 25%, and other 3% (2000 est.).
- **Main languages:** Hindi 43.6%, Bengali 8%, Marathi 6.9%, Telugu 6.7%, Tamil 5.7%, Gujarati 4.6%, Urdu 4.2%, Kannada 3.6%, Odia 3.1%, Malayalam 2.9%, Punjabi 2.7%, Assamese 1.3%, Maithili 1.1%, other 5.6%; note - English enjoys the status of subsidiary official language but is the most important language for national, political, and commercial communication; there are 22 other officially recognized languages: Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Dogri, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Konkani, Maithili, Malayalam, Manipuri, Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Santali, Sindhi, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu; Hindustani is a popular variant of Hindi/Urdu spoken widely throughout northern India but is not an official language (2011 est.)
- **Urban population:** 36.4% (2023 est.)
- **Literacy rate:** 74.4% (male: 82.4%, female: 65.8%) (2018 est.)
- **Life expectancy at birth:** Male - 66.5 years; female - 70.1 years

According to [UNDP Human Development Report India](#) (updates as of 13 March 2024):

- **HDI score and ranking:** 0.644 (2022), ranking 134
- **Life expectancy at birth:** 67.7 years (2022)
- **Expected years of schooling:** 12.6 (2022)
- **Gender Inequality Index:** 0.437 (2022), ranking #108 out of 166 countries
- **Labor Force Participation Rate - LFPR (% ages 15 years and older):** Female: 28.3, Male: 76.1 (2022). According to a press release published by India's [Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation](#) on 9 October 2023: "In rural areas, LFPR increased from 50.7% in 2017-18 to 60.8% in 2022-23 while for urban areas it increased from 47.6% to 50.4%. LFPR for male in India increased from 75.8% in 2017-18 to 78.5% in 2022-23 and corresponding increase in LFPR for female was from 23.3% to 37.0%."

The most characteristic social feature of India is the caste system – a hierarchical stratification of Indian society dating back many centuries. According to a tradition called Varna, there are four castes (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras), plus a list of groups, now known as Dalits, who were historically excluded from the Varna system altogether, and are still ostracized as “Untouchables”. The caste system is omnipresent in India with upper castes ruling the country.

As many as [138,825 cases](#) related to crimes against Dalits were filed across the country between 2018 and 2020, Union Minister Ramdas Athawale told parliament on 22 March 2022. Athawale said 42,793 cases of atrocities were reported in 2018. The number rose to 45,961 in 2019 and 50,291 in 2020 (Hindustan Times, 23 March 2022).

It may come as a surprise that the caste system also permeates the Church in India. Most Christians in India come from the lower castes or even the the Scheduled Castes, commonly self-identified as Dalits. Many converted from Hinduism partly to escape their hopeless situation as “Untouchables” only to find that the same barriers exist inside the Church. The fact that several became disappointed partly explains why the [Ghar Wapsi campaign](#) of the Hindu radicals has been effective in reconverting many back to Hinduism (World Watch Monitor, 16 February 2017). Abolishing elements of the caste system still existing in the Church is a major challenge still to be dealt with.

The Constitution (Scheduled Caste) Order 1950 identifies caste communities who have experienced extreme difficulties arising out of 'untouchability'. These Dalit communities were singled out for affirmative action benefits under various government policies, including education and employment. However, Paragraph 3 of the Constitution Order initially limited the classification of Scheduled Castes only to Hindus. In 1956 and in 1990, the Order was amended to expand Scheduled Castes to Sikhs and Buddhists, but Dalits from Christianity and Islam continue to be excluded. A major reason why many (Dalit) Christians do not officially convert to Christianity is because they stand to lose benefits from affirmative action. In April 2023, the Supreme Court decided to adjudicate on the issue of Dalit Muslims and Christians accessing benefits of affirmative action.

With a recession already beginning after the government's [demonitization in 2016](#) (Live Mint, 30 August 2018), the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic had a huge further impact on society, with many businesses being forced to stop working, which caused large numbers of employees to lose their jobs and income. 21 million salaried jobs were lost between April 2020 and August 2020, while the unemployment rate in India rose to 8.4% in August 2020 ([Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy](#), last

accessed 27 December 2022). 95.2% of migrants lost their jobs and livelihoods, as confirmed by a survey conducted by Caritas India in the 18 states most affected by the pandemic. Millions of people have been thrust into extreme poverty and hunger, not through illness but because of the economic impact of the lockdown measures.

As stated above (see: *Economic landscape*), Christians make up the [largest unemployed group](#) among all minorities in India (without even including the number of new Christians who officially stick to their Hindu status for various socio-economic reasons). Would this number of 'unofficial Christians' have been included, the proportion of unemployed Christians would have been even bigger. Many Christians live in slum areas where many of the residents become totally dependent upon food distribution programs carried out by the government and aid organizations. Christians have often been deliberately overlooked when this aid is distributed.

Gender perspective

Against this backdrop of patriarchal norms and a hierarchical caste system, the weakest in society are exploited. Women and girls are considered weak and emotional subjects, so violations against Christian women and girls is often targeted at their body through molestation and sexual harassment ([Religious Freedom and Business Foundation, 3 November 2020](#)). Men and boys on the other hand, are viewed as physically strong. Persecution consequently targets their physical strength (through beatings and torture) as well as their role as family decision-maker.

Women and girls in India are still widely neglected and perceived to be inferior. They have lower literacy and education rates. Society's preference for boys leads to selective abortion of girls and to female infanticide; thousands of girls have been reportedly aborted on the basis of their sex ([ADF, 6 May 2021](#); [BBC News, May 2022](#)). India has a growing female population deficit of 35 million. The media in India bring reports of rape virtually every day. Police forces often do not show any real interest in helping victims or bringing justice to the perpetrators. There is no difference in the situation of women and girls if they are Christians.

Sexual attacks on women harm the victim's wider family and community due to the connotations between sexual purity and pride and prestige within Indian culture. There is particularly strong stigma and shame around reporting sexual abuse against boys, which is also reported to be widespread (in part as they have more freedom to leave the home in India's patriarchal society, thus becoming more exposed to potential contexts of abuse) ([Reuters, 8 May 2018](#)). Domestic violence is also reportedly high, compounded by socio-economic dependency of women upon men, the impact of COVID-19 and the dominance of patriarchal norms ([BBC News, 3 May 2022](#); [UN News, 28 December 2020](#)).

Technological landscape

According to [DataReportal Digital 2024: India](#) (21 February 2024) / survey date: January 2024:

- **Internet usage:** 52.4% penetration
- **Social media usage:** 32.2% of the total population. According to [Napoleon Cat \(July 2024\)](#), there were 68.5% male users of Facebook and 31.5% female.
- **Active cellular mobile connections:** 78.0% of the total population

As highlighted in the [2020 GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report](#), the gender gap in mobile Internet awareness has decreased dramatically in recent years. 50% of women surveyed in 2019 reported awareness, compared to just 19% two years previously. However, progress has stalled. According to the [2022 GSMA report](#), mobile Internet adoption among men climbed steadily to 51%, but there has been no notable increase among women, which remains flat at 30 per cent. (For more on the mobile gender gap, see the 2022 report: Spotlight: India, p.45).

According to [BuddeComm Research](#) (publication date: August 2024):

- "India's telecommunications sector has struggled for growth over the last five years. The sector's lacklustre performance has been in spite of concerted efforts by the government to bolster the underlying infrastructure in a bid to achieve universal coverage. Instead, the country's relatively liberal regulatory environment has encouraged fierce competition and price wars amongst the operators".
- "State-owned as well as private operators have been forced to seek redress from the government in order to avoid bankruptcy. One particular area of contention has been the billions owed by the operators to the government in the form of Adjusted Gross Revenue (AGR) dues – usage and licensing fees charged by the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) – that have been the subject of long-standing court battles over what should be counted as revenue."
- The company, Reliance Jio, has developed "a 100%-homegrown 5G solution for India, including radios integrated with its own 5G core network as well as Jio 5G smartphones."

According to [Freedom on the Net 2023 India](#):

- "Internet freedom in India worsened during the coverage period, following marginal improvement the previous year, when efforts to bridge the country's digital divides expanded access to the internet. The government continues to impose internet shutdowns and is considering legislation that would expand its legal authority for such restrictions. Legal challenges to laws enabling the government to censor online content—including against the controversial Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 (IT Rules)—have seen limits imposed on some powers. However, the state continues to block online content at an increasing pace, and Indian internet users risk arrest for posts critical of the government. Misinformation and disinformation are frequently shared online, and journalists, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and members of marginalized groups remain at risk of being targeted by hate speech and harassment online."

Digital authoritarianism on the horizon

Just beyond the WWL 2024 reporting period, there have been further negative developments concerning the regulation of Internet and other forms of communication. Over December 2023 and January 2024, the government of India proposed three new bills:

- The Broadcasting Services (Regulation) Bill
- The Telecom Bill
- The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023.

Taken together, these bills can only serve to erode freedom of expression of both digital media institutions and citizens who use the Internet. Stated bluntly: This legislation threatens to inaugurate a new regime of digital authoritarianism in India.

Further information

Among the rapid economic changes mentioned above, investment in technology has skyrocketed in India. The introduction of new technology started in the major cities, but India has also begun to modernize rural areas, giving almost everyone Internet access. A [report](#) published on 26 September 2019 by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and Nielsen, showed that the total number of internet users in rural India is 227 million against 205 million of urban users.

This means that Christians and others have more access to Christian materials than ever before, but it could also open the eyes of people in India (especially the younger generation) to what is going on in the rest of the world. Hindu hard-liners are continually attacking the Christian media, accusing them of evangelism. There have already been instances where cable operators have been pressured by Hindu groups into removing Christian content even as Hindu content and channels multiply.

In the past decade, Christian satellite TV channels and other Christian media have expanded enormously. India has no e-censorship which means that Christians are free to publish whatever they want. This means (among other things) that Christians also have many more possibilities for reporting on violence, intolerance and discrimination. Websites reporting in this manner are: [Matters India](#), [Christian Today India](#) and the site of the [Evangelical Fellowship of India](#).

Security situation

A major issue in India is the high level of physical violence and the lack of respect for human life. Honor killings, acid throwing, beatings by mobs, executions and many other atrocities happen regularly all over the country. Christians are often the victims of these actions as testified by the long lists of violent incidents published annually. However, the media in India is often biased against Christians. It is often the case that, even if Christians report the hostility they face, the media simply ignore them or entirely focus their reports on the perpetrators. This is done in an attempt to either distort the true nature of the persecution going on or to justify the perpetrator's position by spreading suspicion and hatred towards Christians.

Hindu radicalism

Hindu radicalism has gained momentum since the beginning of the 1990s. The ultimate aim of these Hindu groups is to change India from being a secular country (as defined by the country's Constitution) into a country where Hinduism is the state religion. Over the years, Hindu radicals have carried out numerous violent attacks against non-Hindu religious minorities. There has been little if any protection against these attacks from the local, state or national authorities. Modi's administration refuses to speak out against this violence, which results in a constant increase in the level of impunity. Local police officers have a reputation for being corrupt. In the states and many other areas where the BJP forms the government, police officers are known for not being neutral and for often siding with Hindu hard-liners. They regularly take part in raids on Christian meetings, issue threats to Christians, refuse to register cases reported by Christians (FIR registrations) and give protection to radical Hindus involved in acts of violence, intolerance and discrimination. When Christians want to register a

complaint, the local police will refuse to do so in about 90% of the cases. The police also have a reputation for brutality and mistreating Christians who are in custody.

Ethnic violence in Manipur affecting Christians

In 2023, violence erupted between the Meitei (mostly Hindu) and Kuki (mostly Christian) ethnic groups in Manipur state. The Meitei are the majority (close to 53%) while Kuki-Zo are only 16%. The conflict was triggered when Meitei sought to extend their dominance by demanding their inclusion in the Scheduled Tribes list so that they could start occupying hill territories reserved for Nagas, Kuki-Zo and other tribal groups. The violence, which caused well over 100 churches to go up in flames (see above: *Specific examples of violations of rights*), was sparked by the Kukis protesting against the Meiteis' demand for tribal status. According to BBC News reporting on 12 July 2023: "Now the Kuki have demanded '[territorial autonomy](#)' for the group, a euphemism for a separate, independent administration. The Meitei have warned that any dismemberment of Manipur is out of question. ... Life and work between the two communities has stalled. Internet has been cut all over the state, further heightening the isolation." It is likely that ethnic unrest will continue until a political resolution is found.

Maoists/Naxalites

Another major problem for Christians in India is the presence of the Maoists, a.k.a. Naxalites. (It is believed that the term Naxal/Naxalite derives from the name of the village Naxalbari in the Indian State of West Bengal, where the movement had its origin.) They are a remnant of the Cold War era and are Communist militants whose strongholds are to be found in the poorest regions of India. These are regions that are difficult to control, such as the jungles of Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Kerala, Maharashtra, Odisha and Telangana. Christians living in areas under Naxalite control are constantly monitored and cannot openly practice their faith. If they refuse to follow each and every command, the Naxalites will pick them out and set an example during a special village meeting. This may be limited to a severe beating, but can go as far as an open execution.

There are some major reasons why Christians are subjected to violence in the Naxal-prone areas:

- Local villagers who are generally anti-Christian sometimes encourage Naxalite action against Christians, convincing them that Christians in the villages are police informants reporting Naxal activities. As a result Naxals do not hesitate to kidnap, brutally beat and kill Christians.
- Christians are known to share their faith and thus help convert people (even Naxal leaders) to Christianity. This angers the Naxalite community which then abducts and kills Christian leaders.
- Christians in villages generally do not provide shelter and food for Naxals, unlike other locals.

National security

There are ongoing conflicts between India and its neighbors (especially Pakistan, China, Nepal). The relationship between India and Pakistan has always been tense since 1947 - especially concerning the region of Jammu & Kashmir. Border fighting between China and India occurred in [June 2020](#) when 20 Indian and 43 Chinese soldiers died (Asia News, 17 June 2020). On 11 October 2021 China and India [blamed each other](#) for the failure of high-level talks to ease tensions along the disputed Himalayan border, particularly the strategically important Galwan River valley between Tibet and India's Ladakh

region (UCA News, 13 October 2021). This high-altitude conflict continues to simmer in the background.

A conflict broke out between [India and Nepal](#) about border region control in May 2020 (Hindustan Times, 10 June 2020). [Nepal's prime minister](#) Sher Bahadur Deuba met Prime Minister Modi in April 2022 during a three-day trip to New Delhi and signed a series of agreements to enhance their ties (Reuters, 2 April 2022). At the same time, Nepal is also deepening relations with India's rival China: Deuba's visit to India came just shortly after [Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's visit](#) to Kathmandu (AP News, 26 March 2022).

Concerning radical Islamic elements

According to [US State Department IRFR 2022 India](#): (There were no similar reports in [IRFR 2023 India](#).)

- "Terrorist groups *Lashkar-e-Taiyaaba* and *Hizbul Mujahideen* killed several civilians and migrant laborers belonging to the minority Hindu and Sikh communities in Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir during the year. The South Asian Terrorism Portal said 30 civilians and 30 members of the security forces were killed in 151 incidents in the territory during the year [2022]."
- "In August [2022], local officials in Assam demolished three madrassahs in the Bongaigaon, Barpeta, and Morigaon Districts they said had supported terrorist groups. Police arrested 37 persons, including imams and madrassah teachers, for alleged links to the Ansarullah Bangla Team, an affiliate of Al Qaeda in the Indian subcontinent."

Individual security / Gender perspective

Sexual assault is a pervasive issue in India, with the rape of a woman being reported every 15 minutes ([Reuters, 9 January 2020](#)). Women from lower castes and tribes are especially vulnerable (as exemplified by the rape and death of Dalit women in 2020 ([CBS, 1 October, 2020](#))). Recent figures from [National Crime Records Bureau](#) indicate that there was a nearly 20% increase in rapes across India in 2021, with a total of 31,677 cases or a daily average of 86 cases (Financial Express, 3 August 2022).

As noted by Human Rights Watch, a culture of victim-blaming remains prevalent and women face several obstacles in reporting crimes, including a lack of victim protection laws (HRW 2022 country chapter). Trafficking is also an endemic issue ([US State Department, Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2022, p.279](#)). Debt bondage traps entire families in forced labor, and many men, women and children are caught up in networks of human trafficking. Pre-adulthood, more boys are affected. Post-adulthood, more women are affected ([Asia Times, 6 February 2020](#)).

Violent and lethal attacks by radical Hindu groups have focused heavily on Christian leaders and pastors, the majority of whom are men (Open Doors International 2019 report "[We're Indians Too](#)"; [Christian Persecution, 9 July 2021](#)).

Christian origins

According to church tradition, the Apostle Thomas came to India in the 1st century AD and established the first churches in the country – mainly in Kerala. It is assumed that the initial converts were largely Jewish proselytes among the Cochin Jews who are believed to have arrived in India around 562 BC, after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. Another tradition mentions Saint Bartholomew who visited India in the 2nd century AD.

In the 4th century, several Christians from the Middle East came to India to evangelize. The colony of Syrian Christians established at Kodungallur may be the first Christian community in South India for which there is a continuous written record. The most important leader of these Christians was Thomas of Cana.

The Dominican missionary, Jordanus Catalani, was the first Catholic European to arrive in India in 1320 and start missionary work from the city of Surat. The 15th century saw the rise of colonialism. For India this meant the arrival of the Portuguese in Goa and other cities, and with them Catholic missionaries belonging to different orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, Jesuits, Augustinians, etc.) who began at once to build churches along the coastal districts where Portuguese power made itself felt.

The first Protestant missionaries to set foot in India were two Lutherans from Germany, Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau, who began work in 1705 in the Danish settlement of Tranquebar (now known as Tharangambadi in Tamil Nadu). In 1793, William Carey, an English Baptist minister came to India as a missionary. He worked in Serampore, Calcutta, and other places and translated the Bible into Bengali, Sanskrit and numerous other languages and dialects. He worked in India until his death in 1834. During the 19th century, several American Baptist missionaries evangelized in the north-eastern parts of India. Even today, the heaviest concentrations of Christians in India continue to be in the northeast among the Nagas, Khasis, Kukis and Mizos.

Church spectrum today

India: Church networks	Christians	%
Orthodox	5,719,000	7.8
Catholic	22,510,000	30.7
Protestant	25,078,000	34.2
Independent	21,394,000	29.2
Unaffiliated	189,000	0.3
Doubly-affiliated Christians	-1,657,000	-2.3
Total	73,233,000	100.0
<i>(Any deviation from the total number of Christians stated above is due to the rounding of decimals)</i>		
Evangelical movement	13,365,000	18.2
Pentecostal-Charismatic	23,005,000	31.4

Zurlo G A and Johnson T M, eds., *World Christian Database*, Leiden/Boston: Brill, accessed May 2024

Orthodox: Eastern (Chalcedonian), Oriental (Pre-Chalcedonian, Non-Chalcedonian, Monophysite), Nestorian (Assyrian), and non-historical Orthodox. **Roman Catholics:** All Christians in communion with the Church of Rome. **Protestants:** Christians in churches originating in or in communion with the Western world's 16th-century Protestant Reformation. Includes Anglicans, Lutherans and Baptists (any of whom may be Charismatic) and denominational Pentecostals, but not Independent traditions such as Independent Baptists nor independent Charismatics. **Independents:** Christians who do not identify with the major Christian traditions (Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant). **Unaffiliated Christians:** Persons professing publicly to be Christians but who are not affiliated to churches. **Doubly-affiliated Christians:** Persons affiliated to or claimed by 2 denominations at once. **Evangelical movement:** Churches, denominations, and individuals who

identify themselves as evangelicals by membership in denominations linked to evangelical alliances (e.g., World Evangelical Alliance) or by self-identification in polls. **Pentecostal-Charismatic:** Church members involved in renewal in the Holy Spirit, sometimes known collectively as "Renewalists".

Further useful reports

A selection of in-depth reports and smaller articles are available on the Research & Reports pages of the Open Doors website:

- <https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/research-reports/>.

These are also available on the Open Doors Analytical website (password: freedom):

- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/?s=India>
- <https://opendoorsanalytical.org/reports/>.
- [India - Spotlight on Kerala, Odisha and Chhattisgarh - July 2024 update](#)
- [India - Report on the 2024 General Elections - What are the implications? - revised July 2024](#)
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