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Christians forced to convert to Hinduism or be denied benefits lifting them out of poverty as 'Untouchables'

Stoyan Zaimov

The Christian Post (21.07.2015) - <http://wwrn.org/articles/44748/> - A Hindu nationalist organization has converted 39 people from Dalit Christian families to Hinduism in a controversial ceremony aimed at making them eligible for a government benefits program.

"We are moving ahead with our initiative and more families from other religions will be reconverted to Hinduism soon. We are being approached by many people who want to come back to their original faith," said Viswaha Hindu Parishad Alappuzha District Chief Prathap G Padickal, according to the Times of India.

The "ghar wapsi" programme in Kerala's Alappuzha district previously oversaw another 30 Dalit Christians convert to Hinduism in December 2014.

The Dalits, known as the "untouchables," make up India's lowest caste, and are eligible for certain government benefits if they identify as Hindus.

International Christian Concern, which reports on persecution taking place in India, noted that Christians from such low caste backgrounds are often soft targets for Hindu nationalists, who are seeking to take advantage of the stipulation in the government benefits program and lure people of other faiths into Hinduism.

"In most cases, people from low caste backgrounds are afforded government stipends and advantages, but these stipends and advantages are denied to low caste people who are registered as Christians or Muslims in India," ICC noted. "In many cases the allurements of these government stipends and advantages are enough to convince people to convert to Hinduism."

ICC previously said that as many as 25 million Dalits who have converted to Christianity are being forced to choose between their Christian faith and eligibility for these benefits. The government program stretches back to the Scheduled Caste Order of 1950, which determines who can take advantage of these government benefits, and who cannot.

"It also has left millions of Dalits to have to decide between choosing to follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior and receiving government benefits that have the ability to take their families out of poverty. All added up, this discrimination has affected the official appearance of India's religious landscape," the persecution watchdog group said.

The stipulations in the program have also been condemned by Christian rights activists, such as Franklin Caesar, who said:

"This system is against the fundamental rights provided to all India's citizens in the Constitution. The Presidential Order of 1950 has destroyed fundamental and constitutional rights of Dalits from Christian and Muslim backgrounds; the benefits must be delinked from religion."

With the rise of Christian and Muslim numbers in India, Hindu extremists have accused other faiths of converting Hindus, and have lashed out in attacks on churches across the country.

Back in June, over 200 Hindu radicals stormed a Protestant church in the town of Attingal, Kerala, where they beat the pastor and several worshippers, before breaking the altar of the church. The attack was only stopped after police arrived at the scene.

Dalit Christians in India file complaint with UN against the Vatican

UCA (30.06.2015) - Christian Dalits in India filed a complaint on Tuesday with the United Nations accusing the Holy See of not doing enough to curb discrimination faced by "untouchables" within the Catholic Church.

A delegation of 22 people from the Dalit Christian Liberation Movement (DCLM) and Viduthalai Tamil Puligal Katchi (a collective of human rights activists) submitted the complaint at the UN Information Centre for India and Bhutan in Delhi.

"We have submitted seven copies of the complaint to Rajeev Chandran, assistant director of the UN Centre in New Delhi addressed to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and different human rights organizations," Mary John, president of the DCLM, told ucanews.com.

The complaint accuses the Vatican and the Indian Catholic Church leadership of caste-based discrimination "by way of allowing it directly and indirectly in their spiritual, educational and administrative places".

The delegation asked the UN and other organizations to urge the Holy See to eradicate the caste discriminatory practices and to withdraw the Permanent Observer position of the Holy See in the UN if the Vatican does not take the necessary steps.

Dalits, or untouchables, are the lowest caste within Hindu society. Huge numbers of Dalits have converted to Christianity and Islam over the decades, though in reality the religions offer limited protection from societal prejudice.

"The discrimination against Dalit Christians in the Catholic Church is a human rights issue and it would be right if we approach the UN to find a solution to it," John said.

Kudanthai Arasan, president of the Viduthalai Tamil Puligal Katchi, said Dalit Christians routinely face discrimination in their daily life.

"There are separate cemeteries for Dalit Christians. Even in the church there are separate seating arrangements for those from the Dalit community and others. The festival choir processions do not enter the streets where Dalit Christians live," he said, adding that in some churches even the dead body of a Dalit Christian is not allowed inside for funeral Mass.

While Dalit Christians form 70 percent of the total Catholic population in India, said John, their representation in the Church leadership is only 4-5 percent.

He added that Dalits are not recruited for the priesthood and are rarely permitted to be appointed as bishops.

Out of about 200 active bishops in India, only nine are from the Dalit community.

"We have raised our voice time and again to end this practice in the Indian Church, but our pleas have been falling on deaf ears," he added.

The Dalit Christians also blamed the top bishops' body in India — the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) — for not pursuing the issue with the Holy See.

"They do not take our case seriously to the Vatican. The CBCI has come out with declarations terming caste-ism as [a] sin but they themselves are practicing it," John said.

However, Fr Joseph Chinnayyan, CBCI deputy secretary general, told ucanews.com that the organization has never received any complaint of discrimination against Dalits in the Catholic Church in the past.

He said that as far as the Dalit Christians' complaint about the issue to the UN is concerned, "we are not aware of any such complaint and will only respond once we receive any communication about it".

Two Christian churches vandalized by suspected Hindu fundamentalists

UCA (23.03.2015) <http://www.ucanews.com/news/check-two-christian-churches-vandalized-by-suspected-hindu-fundamentalists/73238> - Suspected Hindu fundamentalists were accused of vandalizing two more churches in India over the weekend, in the latest violence against Christians in the Hindu-majority country.

Officials from Kalyan diocese in western India said three masked men on motorcycles approached the St George Catholic Church in New Panvel early on Saturday and threw stones, smashing a glass case protecting the statue of Saint George.

In the other incident on Friday, assailants entered the Cathedral complex of the Jabalpur diocese in central India's Madhya Pradesh state.

CCTV footage showed a group of men smashing plant pots, breaking down doors and shattering windows on the grounds of the cathedral.

The right-wing Hindu Dharma Sena group had accused the church of converting around 200 people from local tribal groups to Christianity, although it denies causing any damage to church property.

On Monday, state police said they had arrested six people in the Jabalpur attack.

"We arrested six men last night in connection with the vandalism. We are trying to identify more people... there may be more arrests," HC Mishra, a senior state police official, told AFP by telephone.

However, police then later released the group on bail. Mishra told ucanews.com the arrested were given bail because they were charged with "minor offences under the Indian Penal Code".

Bishop Gerald Almeida of Jabalpur called the releases "very unfortunate".

"Such kind of tokenism from police would not help bring in confidence among beleaguered Christians," he said in an interview.

Almeida said on the same night as the Jabalpur attack, assailants entered a school building a kilometer away and beat up Catholics they had found inside. The victims had travelled to the church for an annual Bible convention, he said.

Marko Baba, a Catholic leader in Jabalpur, said he witnessed some of the attack after friends called him to tell him about the disturbance. He told ucanews.com that the assailants accused the victims of participating in conversions.

Religious conversions are highly controversial in India, a secular country where religious freedom is considered a fundamental right. Critics say Hindu hardline groups have become emboldened since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won power in India last year.

The latest attacks on churches show that "the situation is turning [from] bad to worse," said Cardinal Baselios Cleemis, who heads the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India.

"Some people are bent on dividing the country on religious lines and making it a theocracy," he told ucanews.com in an interview Monday. "But the majority who believe in the secular credentials of this nation will not allow it to happen."

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi last month pledged to crack down on religious violence and ensure freedom of worship for all faiths. He had been criticized for not speaking out earlier.

HRWF Footnote

See more info about other church attacks in India in 2015

<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/Church-vandalized-in-Delhi-fourth-in-6-weeks/articleshow/45892142.cms>
<http://www.morningstaronline.co.uk/a-f352-India-police-arrest-Christians-at-New-Delhi-protest-against-church-attacks#.VRcRgLktFM>
<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Church-in-Jabalpur-vandalized-allegedly-by-activists-of-Hindu-outfits/articleshow/46653508.cms>
<http://www.dw.de/half-built-church-vandalized-in-northern-india/a-18317876>
http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/03/23/two_more_churches_vandalized_in_india_/1131572
https://www.google.be/search?q=India+churches+vandalized&rlz=1T4MXGB_frBE563BE563&biw=1301&bih=610&tbm=isch&tbo=u&source=univ&sa=X&ei=LZUQVai6ErPB7Ab7noGgDQ&ved=0CC8QsAQ (Pictures of vandalized churches)

Indian police beat Christian evangelists

WWM (04.03.2015) - Twenty Christian men on an evangelical mission in north-western India last week were illegally detained and tortured by police, according to a human rights group which intervened to force their release.

The People's Union for Civil Liberties worked with local Christians to persuade senior officials to sanction the release of the men, but several were left with severe bruising after the Feb. 25 incident in Jaipur, the capital of India's Rajasthan state.

"We spoke to the Superintendent of Police about the illegal detention and custodial torture," read a Union memorandum, issued later.

Pastor Stephen Raj, one of the leaders of the team from the Hebron Bhakta Singh Fellowship Church in the southern city of Hyderabad, told World Watch Monitor he was "thankful to all of them for rescuing us, especially Kavita [Srivastava]," the regional head of the People's Union for Civil Liberties.

The team had only that morning arrived in the tourist city of Jaipur – known as the 'Pink City' for its terracotta-coloured buildings.

"We went to Rajasthan with a plan to go around preaching and sightseeing for four days, but it lasted only a few hours," Raj said.

The men had arrived at Jaipur's Mansarovar Centre in the afternoon, equipped with a megaphone, intending to preach and to distribute evangelical literature.

"As soon as we started, a man came and asked, 'What is this?' He took our leaflet and went. He must have called the police," Raj said.

When a group of Hindu protesters amassed, the police – in a state governed by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party – dispersed them.

But later, as the Christians were walking back to their hostel, the hardliners followed.

"When we reached the place we were staying, they started abusing us and called the police again," Raj said. "The police came and took us to the police station in two jeeps. They made us stretch out our palms and beat us severely with wooden lathis," sticks often carried by Indian police. "Those who pulled their hands back after the first beating came in for more beatings. Many of us have bruises and blood clots on our palms six days later."

"If they [the human rights activists] had not reached us promptly, we might have had to face more torture," Raj said.

Srivastava said she was "happy that we could reach there in time and rescue them from the police."

After Srivastava's intervention, senior officials ordered the police to take the Christians back to their hostel late that night, said Walter Masih, the evangelical pastor who had coordinated the visit of the preaching team.

However, according to the statement of the People's Union for Civil Liberties, "The police who had gone to drop [off] the 20 [Christians] had pressured the owner of the hostel...to not let them spend the night there. The [Christians] were thrown out with food and water on the road and told to make their way to the railway station and not return to the city. They were told that cases of [forced] conversions would be filed if they would not leave the city."

Seven of India's 29 states have laws forbidding forced religious conversions. Ostensibly meant to protect each person's freedom of belief, the laws are often used against religious minorities.

Masih, who was attacked by Hindu hardliners while holding a Sunday service in Jaipur in 2007, said: "Police ordered them to carry their luggage and told them they would be dropped at the railway station. But the police left them on the [side of the] road around midnight."

The men were left to find their own way to the bus station, where they boarded a bus to New Delhi, 270 kilometres north, before taking a train to Hyderabad the next day.

"The Hindu fundamentalists were there shouting slogans even against us Hindus while we were in the police station. That shows the danger the country is facing today," said Srivastava. "This is a clear case of the police being used to harass minorities, especially Christians."

Srivastava said the incident occurred less than 48 hours after Mohan Bhagwat, national chief of the right-wing Hindu group, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, attacked the work of Mother Theresa on his own visit to Rajasthan on Feb. 23.

Bhagwat, addressing a women's empowerment program in a village in the Bharatpur district, said: "It's good to work for a cause with selfless intentions, but Mother Theresa's work had an ulterior motive, which was to convert the person who was being served to Christianity."

"In the name of service, religious conversions were made. This was followed by other institutes, too," Bhagwat told the women's conference.

Bhagwat is campaigning for India to become a Hindu 'Rashtra,' or nation. The Bharatiya Janata Party, political front of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, has held a majority in the Indian Parliament since May 2014.

Bhagwat's comments about Mother Theresa sparked a national furore that even disrupted the Indian Parliament; the Upper House was briefly adjourned as it debated the issue on Feb. 26.

"The whole nation was shocked by Bhagwat's statement," said Srivastava. "The RSS has its clear agenda – to create animosity against the Christians and others. The result is

before us... As long as such hate speeches are not stopped, the attacks against Christians and others will only increase.”

Evangelical Fellowship of India: persecution watch annual report 2014

<http://www.worldea.org/images/wimg/files/EFI.Persecution.Watch.Annual.Report.2014.pdf>

World Evangelical Alliance (26.02.2015) –

<http://www.worldea.org/news/4526/evangelical-fellowship-of-india-persecution-watch-annual-report-2014> - The Christian community in India is concerned at the intensity of the targeted and communal violence directed against it almost on a pan India basis. Violence against Christians picked up in independent India in the early 1990s reaching its peak in 2008 - 2009 with more than 1000 incidents of violence and hate crimes reported against the Christian community. This continues today as vicious hate campaign, physical violence, police complicity, and State impunity contribute to the persecution of the Christian community in many states of India.

Human Rights and Civil Society groups have documented the death of at least two persons in 2014, killed for their Christian faith. The Persecution data lists partially 147 cases. The two cases of death in communal anti Christian violence were reported from Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.

An analysis of the data shows Chhattisgarh topping the list with 28 incidents of crime, followed closely by neighbouring Madhya Pradesh with 26, Uttar Pradesh with 18 and Telengana, a newly carved out of Andhra Pradesh, with 15 incidents. Much of the violence has taken place after the new government of the National Democratic alliance headed by the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi, came into power on 26 May, 2014.

The violence peaked between August and October with 56 cases, before zooming up to 25 cases during the Christmas season. The violence has continued well into the New Year 2015, with more Catholic churches in the capital city of Delhi targeted, as incidents continue in other states.

Much of the violence, 54 percent, is of threats, intimidation, coercion, often with the police looking on. Physical violence constituted a quarter of all cases, 24 per cent, and violence against Christian women, a trend that is increasingly being seen since the carnage in Kandhamal, Odisha, in 2007 and 2008, was 11 per cent. Breaking of statues and the Cross, and other acts of desecration were recorded in about 8 per cent of the cases, but many more were also consequent to other forms of violence against institutions. A disturbing trend was violence against Christians in West Bengal, where though one case was formally reported; there have been increasing incidents of hate speech and intimidation..

Police inaction and its failure to arrest the guilty in most cases, its propensity to try to minimise the crime, and in rural areas especially, its open partisanship has almost become the norm. Police ineptitude in forensic investigations has been seen even in New Delhi where four of the five cases in the months of December 2014 and January 2015 have seen no progress in the investigations. In the one case where there were arrests, the Church and the community have cast doubts on the police version of the motives of the suspects whose images were recorded in the Close Circuit TV cameras installed in the church.

The President of India, Mr. Pranab Mukherjee, noted the rise of communalism and the targeting of religious minorities in his address to the Nation on 25th January 2015, the eve of Republic Day. President Mukherjee said "In an international environment where so many countries are sinking into the morass of theocratic violence ...We have always reposed our trust in faith -equality where every faith is equal before the law and every culture blends into another to create a positive dynamic. The violence of the tongue cuts and wounds people's hearts. The Indian Constitution is the holy book of democracy. It is a lodestar for the socio - economic transformation of an India whose civilisation has celebrated pluralism, advocated tolerance and promoted goodwill between diverse communities. These values, however, need to be preserved with utmost care and vigilance."

Mr. Mukherjee touched a point that has worried many among even those who voted for Mr. Modi hoping he would bring about a change from the corruption and economic coma in which the country had found itself in the last few years. The Union and State governments have been dismissive of the Christian complaints of targeted violence and persecution, both by political non-State actors and other elements.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

1. Enact a comprehensive hate crimes legislation to safeguard the rights of religious minorities.
2. The Ministry of Home Affairs should provide trainings on human rights and religious freedom standards and practices to the state and central police and judiciary;
3. Although maintenance of public order is a state responsibility, the central government should issue an advisory to the state governments to repeal the anti-conversion laws;
4. The government should ensure an active Commission for Human Rights and Commission for Minorities is operational in every state, and that members of each commission are appointed by transparent and non-partisan procedures;
5. Prevent and pursue through the judicial process, all violent acts against religious and tribal minorities and Dalits.

Narendra Modi: India PM warns against religious attacks

BBC News (17.02.2015) - <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-31499978> India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi has vowed to protect all religious groups after a string of attacks on churches in Delhi.

Addressing a Christian audience in the capital, he called on all religious groups to show restraint and respect.

Since December, five churches have been attacked, but this is the first time Mr Modi has commented on the issue.

Critics say his Hindu nationalist BJP government is not doing enough to stop Hindu zealots targeting minorities.

Mr Modi has also been blamed for not doing enough to stop the 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat when he was the state's chief minister.

More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the violence, which were sparked by a fire on a train at Godhra in Gujarat that killed 59 Hindu pilgrims.

Mr Modi has denied any wrongdoing and Indian courts have cleared him of all charges.

"I condemn violence against any religion. We will act strongly against such violence," Mr Modi said at a conference organised by Christian groups in Delhi on Tuesday.

"My government will not allow any group belonging to majority or minority to incite hatred against other communities."

Mr Modi also said that "everyone has the undeniable right to retain or adopt the religion of his or her choice without coercion or undue influence".

Christian groups accuse hard-line Hindu groups, emboldened by Mr Modi's landslide in last year's general election, of carrying out the recent attacks, but police say there is little evidence for this.

They say they have provided security to more than 200 churches in the capital.

Obama challenges India on women's rights and religious tolerance

President speaks out in Delhi on importance of empowering women in India in wake of recent high-profile sexual attacks

The Guardian (27.01.2015) <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/27/obama--india-womens-rights-religious-intolerance-delhi> -

Barack Obama challenged India's record on religious tolerance and women's rights on Tuesday in a parting speech to students in Delhi that contrasted with the at-times saccharin feel of a state visit designed to highlight the closeness of the two countries.

Though careful to acknowledge inequality in the US, the president devoted a substantial part of his speech to a lecture on the importance of empowering women in society and addressed a recent spate of sexual attacks in the emerging south Asian power.

"We know from experience that nations are more successful when their women are successful," said Obama. "These are facts. So if nations really want to succeed in today's global economy, they can't simply ignore the talents of half of their people."

"Every daughter deserves the same chance as our sons," he added. "And every woman should be able to go about her day – to walk the street, or ride the bus – and be safe and be treated with the respect and dignity that she deserves."

A series of [high profile gang rapes and other attacks on women](#) in India have prompted widespread public anger. But despite repeated promises by authorities to improve security for women, campaigners say the problem remains acute.

During his only public appearance of the trip without prime minister Narendra Modi by his side, Obama also promoted the rights of religious minorities in the predominantly Hindu country.

"The peace we seek in the world begins in human hearts; it finds its glorious expression when we look beyond any differences in religion or tribe and rejoice in the beauty of every soul," said the president, who namechecked prominent Indian Muslims, Sikhs and sportswomen. "It's when all Indians, whatever your faith, go to the movies and applaud

actors like Shah Rukh Khan. When you celebrate athletes like Milkha Singh, or Mary Kom," he said.

Before becoming prime minister, Modi was previously denied a US visa following accusations he had stood by during, or even encouraged, sectarian violence in the western state of Gujarat in 2002, when he was chief minister. More than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed by rioters. The 64 year old former rightwing organiser has described himself as a Hindu nationalist and been criticised for not being more vocal about religious pluralism since taking power.

"No society is immune from the darkest impulses of men," said Obama. "India will succeed so long as it is not splintered along the lines of religious faith."

A series of attempts by rightwing Hindu groups to hold mass conversion ceremonies has sparked controversy in recent months. Last week the hardline Vishnu Hindu Parishad group claimed to have ["re-converted" more than 20 Christians](#) in the southern state of Kerala. The organisations come from the same broad political family as Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

However, the US president also acknowledged signs of progress in Indian society, pointing to the symbolic choice of a woman military officer to lead the honour guard on his arrival and to Modi's humble background as a tea-seller as sign of how India has become more socially mobile.

Modi, a political outsider, comes from low down on the tenacious social hierarchy known as caste which still defines social status and determines opportunities for hundreds of millions of Indians.

Obama's own background as the first black US president helped soften his blunt message to India as he also highlighted the two country's shared history of colonialism and oppression. He referenced his grandfather's work as a cook in Kenya when it was under British control, and when Martin Luther King came to India to draw inspiration from Gandhi, he was introduced to some schoolchildren as a "fellow untouchable".

"Even as we live in a world of wrenching inequities, we're also proud to live in countries where even the grandson of cook can become president, even a Dalit can help write a constitution, and even a tea-seller can become prime minister," Obama said.

"Many countries, including America, grapple with complex questions of identity and inequality," he added in his speech, delivered before 2,000 students and human rights activists at Siri Fort auditorium in Delhi.

"Right now, in crowded neighbourhoods not far from here, a man is driving an auto-rickshaw, or washing somebody else's clothes, or doing the hard work no one else will do. A woman is cleaning somebody else's house. A young man is on a bicycle delivering lunch. A little girl is hauling a heavy bucket of water. Their dreams, their hopes, are just as big and beautiful and worthy as ours."

The speech prompted lively discussion on Indian television afterwards about whether it would be seen as a snub to Modi, but contrasted with more effusive coverage of earlier speeches and more trivial moments such as [pictures of him chewing gum](#) during Republic Day parade.

Siddarth Varadarajan, a Delhi-based analyst, said that the "very gentle hint" about religious inclusiveness from Obama sent an "important message".

"He went about as far as any diplomatic visitor can go, and quoted the constitution, so how can anyone object to that. But it highlights the silence of the prime minister on this issue," Varadarajan said.

Obama concluded by quoting Gandhi on India's traditions of tolerance: "He said, 'for me, the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree'. Branches of the same majestic tree."

Obama concluded by quoting Gandhi on India's traditions of tolerance: "He said, 'for me, the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree'. Branches of the same majestic tree."

Ahead of Obama's visit, India's Christians start hotline on Hindu harassment

WWM (26.01.2015) - Indian Christians from across denominations have formed a legal-aid agency, complete with a telephone hotline number, to respond to increasing attacks that have followed the rise of Hindu nationalists to national power.

The United Christian Forum for Human Rights was formed Jan. 19 "to coordinate both legal and advocacy assistance to the community, which has been traumatized in recent months by communal violence in several states," said John Dayal, a prominent Christian activist and spokesperson for the new group, in a statement to World Watch Monitor.

Harassment of India's Christians has increased since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, swept parliamentary elections in May 2014.

The new initiatives have been assembled ahead of U.S. President Barak Obama's visit to India. Asked whether the flurry of anti-Christian violence would figure on Obama's agenda, the new Forum Secretary Rev Vijayesh Lal said: "We have to speak up for ourselves."

Four days before the US President arrived, the Catholic Church urged the government "to uphold the secular character of India." This plea emerged from a meeting of India's top Catholic Church leadership.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference said that recent attacks on Christians, the clamour to turn India into a Hindu nation and attacks on churches and Christians in several parts of the country have "shaken the faith in the secular fabric of the nation."

"The UCF has commissioned a 24-hour National Helpline, 1-800-208-4545, so that lawyers and experts can assist victims of violence, intimidation, coercion and illegal confinement by any criminal or political group," the organizers said in the statement.

"We have had more than 4,000 calls already. Most of them are out of eagerness to verify if it is working and also to express solidarity," said Tehmina Arora, a lawyer with the Alliance for Defending Freedom India.

But already, three serious cases of atrocities have been reported, Arora said. These include a dozen Christian families being ostracized near Kanyakumari, in the peninsular southern tip of India; Christians being prevented from building a church in western Gujarat state; and intimidation of Christians in eastern Bihar state.

"We are verifying these complaints and Christian lawyers in the area will be asked to help them," Arora said.

United Christian Forum coordinator A C Michael said the new forum will be "more of an action group." Christian networks such as the Evangelical Fellowship of India, the Christian Lawyers' Association and the Alliance for Defending Freedom India will be involved in providing timely legal support for needy Christians.

"Church leadership will not be directly involved in it, though we have the blessings of the churches," Michael said. "The Helpline and the Forum will be a watch group to monitor the developments affecting the community."

So far in 2015, at least one violent incident against Christians has been reported each week, according to speakoutagainsthate.org, a website that monitors violence and other attacks on Christian religious freedom.

In December, the National Human Rights Commission of India issued notices to five states – the north-central states of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and the southern states of Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu – citing media reports of acts of violence and atrocities against Christians, according to The Times of India.

"These frequent attacks on the religious institutions of the minority community, if true, violate the fundamental right to freedom of religion and cause immense harm to the social fabric," a Commission statement said.

The Religious Liberty Commission of the Delhi-based Evangelical Fellowship of India recorded 31 incidents targeting Christians in December alone. The cases included physical violence, false accusations, disruption of church services or Christmas functions, hate campaigns and pressure to convert to Hinduism.

The attacks on minorities, including Christians, also led to a debate in the parliament on "rising communal incidents in the country," according to NDTV, a private news channel.

"2014 has been a ... traumatic year... A campaign based on hate ends the year in decisions based on hate," Dayal said at the launch of the new forum, alluding to the election campaign of the BJP and its victory.

In 2014, the EFI monitored at least 144 such cases, but said the actual number is likely to be much higher.

While Christians, churches and their institutions are being attacked in Delhi and various state capitals, cases in smaller cities and villages often go unreported, and victims have little help.

"The United Christian Forum has come together so that we are able to ensure that the voice of the persons in the villages ... reaches New Delhi," forum Chairman Michael William announced at the function.

"The United Christian Forum is about a collective response from our community," said Secretary Rev Vijayesh Lal. "What UCF stands for ... is that we care, that we are here, we are together and we are one body."

The BJP is widely seen as the political wing of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, an umbrella Hindu nationalist group which champions the concept of Hindutva, an ideology

that envisions a Hindu India where minorities are allowed to exist, but in subordination to the majority.

Dayal said Christians live under pressure in India no matter who is at the helm of the government.

"It does not matter who the government is, which the government is," he said. "The non-state actors remain the same, the progress of the judicial criminal system remains the same."

The new Christian Forum and hotline have been assembled just as India hosts U.S. President Barak Obama. Asked whether the flurry of anti-Christian violence would figure into Obama's agenda, Lal said: "We have to speak up for ourselves."

Four days before the president arrived, the Catholic Church issued a statement urging the government "to uphold the secular character of India." This plea emerged from a meeting of India's top Catholic church leadership including the four Cardinals in the Indian Church.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference said that recent attacks on Christians, the clamour to turn India into a Hindu nation and attacks on churches and Christians in several parts of the country have "shaken the faith in the secular fabric of the nation."

Pramod Singh, President of the Christian Legal Association of India and part of the new United Christian Forum, said the idea of India, as "conceived by our founding fathers," is under threat.

He read the preamble to the Constitution before the audience: "We, the people of India, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a sovereign socialist secular democratic republic, and to secure to all its citizens: justice, social, economic and political; liberty of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; equality of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation."

John Dayal said Christians should meet the challenge in prayer "on bended knees."

"But bended before God," he stressed. "Not bended before man and not bended before non-state actors or (the) state itself. India is our motherland, and we claim our rights as children of God and citizens of India with the Bible in one hand and the Constitution of India in the other."

Indian Bishops tell government NO to "saffronisation", YES to secularism

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) calls on Prime Minister Narendra Modi to "urgently intervene" to stop threats against religious freedom across the nation. The impunity enjoyed by radical Hindu groups represents a danger for minorities.

AsiaNews/CBCI (22.01.2015) - <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Indian-Bishops-tell-government-no-to-saffronisation,-yes-to-secularism-33262.html> - Following repeated attempts to "[reconvert Christians and Muslims to Hinduism](#),"

(<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Indian-bishop:-conversions-are-a-blow-to-democracy-and-human-dignity-32958.html>) attacks against "churches, clergy and laity," and the "**saffronisation**" of education and culture, (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Catholic-activist-against-handing-education-over-to-Hindu-fundamentalists-32976.html>) the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India (CBCI) has made a direct appeal to Prime Minister Narendra Modi and to the central government to take a clear position against extremists and radical groups who have gained in power in the wake of the victory by the ultra nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and in so doing they have created a climate of tension and discrimination among minorities.

Recently, a major fundamentalist group called for a **[national law to stop conversions](http://www.asianews.it/news-en/A-national-anti-conversion-law-to-save-India%27s-Hindus-33247.html)** (<http://www.asianews.it/news-en/A-national-anti-conversion-law-to-save-India%27s-Hindus-33247.html>) to religions other than Hinduism. In view of this, "putting an end to such dangerous tendencies is inevitable for the growth and progress of our great nation," the bishops said.

"The Constitution of India guarantees that all the citizens of our country can profess, practice and propagate a religion of their choice. India is a land where different religious faiths have long since flourished, and our Founding Fathers made special efforts to ensure that the rights of all were safeguarded, irrespective of our religious beliefs, gender or caste. Christianity has its roots in Indian soil for more than 2000 years.

"The Christians of India believe in God and believe in the goodness of people and have been selflessly serving the people of this country in the fields of education, health care, etc. without any discrimination on the basis of caste, creed or religion.

"The unfortunate incidents that happened in the past few months in various parts of our country have hurt the sentiments of the Christian community and have shaken the faith in the secular fabric of the nation. The shocking incidents that have taken place against Churches, clergy and laity in Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi have caused great concern for the Christian community. The recent controversies in the name of religious reconversions portray a negative image of India. Communal polarization and the bid to homogenize India are posing threat to all minorities - women, Dalits, and all linguistic, cultural and religious minorities.

"The *Ghar Wapsi* (homecoming) programmes, the saffronisation of education and culture, and the demands for a Hindu Rashtra (nation) are again posing challenges to the secular ethos of our beloved country. Conversions of a religious nature are an exercise of one's free will and one's fundamental constitutional rights, which include freedom of conscience and of religion. *Ghar Wapsi* is a political process, carried out by the powerful exponents of religious nationalism - much against the principle of secularism. It does not even have the legitimacy of freedom of political expression.

"The Christians of this country need assurance from the Government that we are protected and secure and safe in our motherland. We express our strong concern on the aforementioned issues. Putting an end to such dangerous tendencies is inevitable for the growth and progress of our great nation. This great secular nation has to remain as a place where people of all religions and of different cultural backgrounds can live freely, practicing their faith without fear or threat and in harmony. While we recommit ourselves to the progress and development of our nation, we strongly urge Prime Minister Narendra Modi to urgently intervene and take appropriate action to stop incidents that are a big threat to the unity of this secular nation.

Foreign money being spent on religious conversions is an open secret: Venkaiah Naidu

Indian Express (08.01.2015) - Describing religious conversions and re-conversions as equally bad, Union Urban Development Minister Venkaiah Naidu on Thursday said that a "lot of foreign money has been spent on conversions" in India in the past.

"Unnecessary controversies are being raised about conversions.... The (Modi) government is not involved in this. We do not support any religion. The government has no religion. It is the people who have religion and we respect people's faith," he said assuaging any possible fears of Non-Resident India's who had gathered in large numbers at the 13th Pravasi Bharatiya Divas (PBD) at Gandhinagar here.

The minister while presiding over a plenary session on "Opportunities in India" at the PBD, reassured the elite gathering saying that "development and good governance" were the only "agenda" of both Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the NDA government. The minister's comments were greeted by a huge applause at the event where other top ministers of the Modi-government including Uma Bharti, Birender Singh, Mahesh Sharma and Rajiv Pratap Rudy, were also present.

Naidu went to add that Hindutava was not connected to any religion. "We will not support anti-conversion, re-conversion or conversion. It is left to the people. The government will go for a (anti-conversion) law, provided there is a consensus and request from all political parties."

However, also made remarks saying, "If reconversion is bad, conversion is also bad..." Though he repeatedly reassured the gathering that his government was not involved in conversions, Naidu went on say, "India is a free country... It is not that conversions are happening just during the reign of this government. Conversions and re-conversions have been happening in India since the last 200 years. A lot of foreign money is being spent on conversions and it is an open secret..."

"We are neither right or left; we are straight," said Naidu while describing his government's stance on the issue. He said he was forced to clarify on this issue as "some people" and "few English newspapers" were creating controversy on the issue. He said that PM has been connecting directly with the people irrespective of what was being talked about in some news "studios".

Conversion to Islam raises questions about patriotism: VHP

Indian Express (03.01.2015) - The VHP on Friday claimed "ghar wapsi" was essential for the "improvement of the nation" and said that conversion to Islam raised questions about the individual's "nationalism" and "patriotism". The outfit, in a statement issued during a press conference in the Capital on Friday, also linked conversions to Christianity with terrorism in the Northeast.

The VHP also evoked Mahatma Gandhi and Swami Vivekananda to defend "ghar wapsi". The VHP claimed Swami Vivekananda had said that converting to another religion from

Hinduism meant that the "Hindu society has another enemy". The outfit further claimed that Gandhi believed that the "goal of Christian missionaries is to uproot Hindutva completely and to establish a different ideology in its place".

The VHP statement further said, "As a result of conversion (to Islam), questions are raised on their nationality and patriotism." The statement was issued by VHP national secretary Dharma Narayan Sharma and Jugal Kishore, functionary in charge of "ghar wapsi".

With the VHP planning a "ghar wapsi" of over 3,000 Muslims in Ayodhya in February, secretary general Champat Rai claimed the "need of the hour" was to ensure that anyone "who has converted to Christianity or Islam and is willing to join Hindu society, is reintegrated into Hindu society and returns to their mool jaati (original caste)".

Reiterating VHP president Praveen Togadia's view that "ghar wapsi" didn't imply conversion, Rai said conversion to other religions from Hinduism leads to individuals becoming disconnected from their ancestors. "We are not asking people to forsake anything. We want them to reconnect with their ancestors, their culture and traditions," he said.

On day 2, Bathinda 'ghar wapsi' still a damp squib

For the second consecutive day Friday, none of the 200 Christian families turned up for the 'ghar wapsi', organised by the VHP here.

On Thursday, the VHP had organised 'ghar wapsi' for 100 Christian families, who were to be "reconverted" to Sikhism and Hindusim. When they failed to show up, the VHP had claimed that 200 such families would be reconverted Friday.

The VHP has now indefinitely postponed the programme in Bathinda, but "efforts are on to convince families to return to Hinduism/Sikhism by Maghi, and the programme may be held on January 13 or 14".

VHP state secretary Sukhpal Singh Sran cited "worsening relations between SAD and BJP" as the main reason for the families refusing to turn up. "The programme for ghar wapsi of around 200 families is postponed as of now. There was immense pressure on us and the families from Christians and local Sikh organisations," he added.
