

**USCIRF Testimony**  
**September 20, 2023**  
**Irfan Nooruddin**

Good morning and thank you for holding this important conversation, and for inviting me to join my distinguished colleagues on this panel. My name is Irfan Nooruddin. I am a professor in the School of Foreign Service and Department of Government at Georgetown University. My research focuses on Indian elections and politics; global democratization and democratic backsliding; and religious nationalism.

My esteemed colleagues have described in considerable detail the policies and laws enacted in India over the past decade that imperil the practice of religious freedom in that country, and with it risk dealing a fatal blow to the unique experiment of secular multi-ethnic multi-religious democracy envisioned by India's independence movement that has been a beacon of hope for countless peoples around the world. I will use my time therefore to focus elsewhere, specifically on the societal transformation occurring in parts of India that fuel the religious bigotry and violence that should concern all who wish India well. These changes, I will argue, are more a challenging feature of contemporary Indian society to understand for foreign observers, yet perhaps also offers the US government its best opportunity to pressure the Indian government to defend the values of pluralism, equality, and liberty that leaders of both nations love to claim they share.

A focus on society – rather than government actions – might seem a strange choice for such a hearing. But hear me out. Shifting our vantage makes clear that India's challenges with religious freedom are not new, nor are they the redoubt of any one political party or government. There is quite bluntly plenty of shame and guilt to be shared by the so-called guardians of India's public institutions charged with safeguarding the Constitution's commitment to secular democracy. Instead, when convenient, governments and politicians of all stripes have sought to inflame religious tensions by polarizing the electorate to gain an advantage at the polls. Too often, as distinguished political scientists such as Ashutosh Varshney of Brown University<sup>1</sup>; Steven Wilkinson of Yale University<sup>2</sup>; and the late Paul Brass of the University of Washington<sup>3</sup>, have painstakingly documented, such cynical electioneering has spilled over into outright violence. As far back as the 1950s, India's newspapers document large-scale riots in which hundreds lose their lives, many more are maimed and scarred, and countless more lose what little property they possess to rampaging mobs. The deadly riots that rocked Bombay in January 1993 following a months-long provocation that culminated in the gleeful destruction of an ancient mosque in Ayodhya is one such example. The 2002 pogrom in Gujarat is another. In each, over a thousand people were murdered in the streets and in their homes over a matter of a few days. This summer we have watched similar scenes unfold in Manipur where ethnic conflict has targeted the minority Christian tribal population, and hundreds of churches have been set ablaze.

If such large-scale conflagrations are the crescendos, then the steady drum beat of this macabre score is the everyday violence that has grown over the past decade. Vigilante groups – in a manner reminiscent

---

<sup>1</sup> Varshney, Ashutosh. 2003. *Ethnic conflict and civic life: Hindus and Muslims in India*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Wilkinson, Steven. 2006. *Votes and violence: Electoral competition and ethnic riots in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Brass, Paul R. 2011. *The production of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

of the darkest periods of American history – harass, beat, and murder Muslim men rumored to be smuggling beef; or dating a Hindu girl; or insulting a deity. No evidence is required – and of course even if the “charges” were true, none of these are criminal acts, and these vigilantes have no authority, and yet act they do. They do so emboldened by the recognition that Indian society is religiously segregated, and while many in polite society might prefer their actions were less flagrant, their sympathies are not conflicted. They do so knowing full well that the authorities are unlikely to ever take action or hold them accountable. Indeed, a running joke today is that it’s far more likely that the victims will be charged by the police than the perpetrators on the grounds of ‘inflaming religious tension’. The fact that the government of the day does nothing to stop such violence or to enforce the laws of the land generates what I term ‘majoritarian impunity’. If anything, in election speech dog whistles, and by over action – a Minister of the central government garlanding eight men charged with murdering a Muslim man they accused of transporting beef<sup>4</sup>, or a well-oiled IT cell amplifying hate on every available platform even as the government cracks down on critics and dissenters by forcing US companies to delete accounts, censor content, or risk losing FCRA licenses and having the Enforcement Directorate show up – the message received is loud and clear. Act as you wish; we have your back. The consequence is a chill on religious freedom in a country where visible symbols of religious diversity are everywhere: from how people dress, to what they eat, to where and how they pray. In response, one begins to hide, to retreat to the safety of the ghetto, and the bigots claim victory.

What can we do? Given the messages sent to Delhi by the Executive and Legislative branches, it’s hard not to be cynical and assume that the problem is not a lack of policy options but rather a lack of will and of commitment to our so-called shared values. Yet, I’ll make a suggestion: if my analysis is correct, the attacks on religious freedom today involve the government’s silence and lack of action, rather than any explicit involvement in ordering or carrying out the attacks. Perhaps this offers an opening for the US government to call upon its alleged partner to speak more clearly and act more decisively to defend religious minorities and freedom. By keeping the focus on how the government might act to curb societal excess, we can offer to share America’s hard-learned lessons of combating segregation and racial violence, and of how US anti-discrimination legislation and regulation are enforced and given teeth. The rhetoric of every joint statement issued by the US and Indian government proclaims a shared commitment to the principle of unity in diversity. Let’s offer India to work together to achieve this goal – their response will reveal much about the future of Indian’s religious freedom.

Thank you.

---

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/world/asia/india-jayant-sinha-lynch-mob.html> (Accessed Sept 19, 2023).