



UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

May 2024

ADVANCING RELIGIOUS FREEDOM WITHIN THE U.S.-INDIA BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP

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USCIRF's Mission

To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.

On September 20, 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) held a hearing, [*Advancing Religious Freedom within the U.S.-India Bilateral Relationship*](#). The hearing, led by Chair Abraham Cooper, brought together several witnesses to examine policy recommendations for the advancement of religious freedom under the U.S.-India bilateral relationship.

Chair [Cooper](#) opened the hearing by highlighting the significant decline in religious freedom in India. Emphasizing USCIRF's consistent recommendation that the U.S. Department of State designate India as a "country of particular concern," or CPC, Chair Cooper described the Indian government's ongoing promotion and enforcement of discriminatory laws and policies targeting minority Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Dalit, and Adivasi populations. He contextualized the hearing by noting Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Washington, DC, in June, where Modi dismissed a question related to religious freedom concerns in India.

[Vice Chair Fred Davie](#) then offered remarks on India's systematic repression of religious minorities through cow slaughter and anti-conversion laws. He highlighted the prolonged detention of religious minorities, including [Meeran Haider](#) and [Rupesh Singh](#), who are both currently detained under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) for protesting religious freedom conditions.

[Fernand de Varennes](#), United Nations Special Rapporteur on minority issues, summarized religious freedom conditions in India as "massive, systematic, and dangerous." He highlighted the ongoing conditions in Manipur and the associated destruction of places of worship as a warning sign and an example of the dangers of inaction. He emphasized that religious discrimination operates at a systematic level in India, as demonstrated by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), detention of journalists and human rights defenders under the UAPA, the revocation of special status from Jammu and Kashmir, and increasing levels of hate crimes since 2014. He noted that tangible steps have not been taken to hold perpetrators of violence accountable, and in some instances, government officials have contributed to hostile rhetoric against religious minorities.

[Tariq Ahmad](#), a Foreign Law Specialist at the Law Library of Congress, provided an overview of the legal framework in India as it relates to religious freedom conditions. He explained that anti-conversion laws are applied across 12 of 28 Indian states and seek to prevent any person from converting or attempting to convert another person through "misrepresentation, force, fraud, undue influence, coercion, allurements, or marriage." He noted that enforcement of these laws varies between states but often includes hefty fines for violations. In addition, Ahmad explained that cow slaughter

laws, particularly in the north, central, and western states, have contributed to a rise in violent cow vigilantism in India. He emphasized that the Supreme Court of India has upheld these laws.

Sarah Yager, the Washington Director of Human Rights Watch, summarized the role of the Indian government in contributing to hateful rhetoric and increasing instances of violence against religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians. Citing communal violence in Haryana and Manipur, as well as cow vigilantism and discriminatory laws, she highlighted the Indian government's lack of response to addressing religious violations. She recommended that the U.S. government:

- Publicly highlight the Indian government's discriminatory policies and practices as well as increasing attacks, incitement, and hate speech toward religious minorities;
- Call on Indian authorities to end harassment of civil society groups;
- Urge Indian authorities to drop politically motivated charges against human rights defenders and religious minorities and to implement police reforms; and
- Urge Indian authorities to prosecute party leaders and their supporters responsible for facilitating and inciting attacks against religious minorities.

Yager emphasized that private diplomacy between the U.S. government and Indian counterparts is insufficient for improving religious freedom concerns. Instead, she argued that "targeted and fact-based public criticism" by the U.S. government is necessary to persuade and impact the actions of the Indian government.

Sunita Viswanath, Executive Director of Hindus for Human Rights, delivered a joint statement on behalf of a coalition of nongovernmental organizations, including the Dalit Solidarity Forum, Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America, Indian American Muslim Council, India Civil Watch International, and New York State Council of Churches. In her statement, Viswanath highlighted India's increasing transnational repression and the role of Hindu Nationalism in contributing to targeted violence and discrimination against Christians and Muslims, including arbitrary arrests, lynchings, and demolition of places of worship. She emphasized that India should be designated as a CPC by the State Department.

Irfan Noorudin, Hamid bin Khalifa Al Thani Professor of Indian Politics at Georgetown University, described the social factors contributing to religious tension and violence in India, focusing on Muslim-Hindu relations. His testimony emphasized the ways in which Indian political parties and officials use religion to capture electoral support, further emboldening vigilante violence. Noorudin argued that religious freedom violations in India can be viewed as the result of government inaction rather than direct involvement in carrying out attacks. As a result, he recommended that the U.S. government pressure Indian officials to speak and act clearly to address religious freedom violations.

Following the witnesses' testimony, Chair Cooper facilitated a question-and-answer session. During this session, USCIRF's Commissioners pressed witnesses on potential policy options to advance religious freedom in India. Witnesses noted that the United States holds considerable leverage, particularly in terms of trade relations with India and access to the U.S. market. Noorudin argued that this provides an opportunity to pressure Indian officials to ensure that U.S. companies operating in India are protected, particularly those employing religious minorities. Additionally, witnesses agreed that human rights considerations, including religious freedom, should be embedded in trade agreements, defense cooperation, and state visits.

Chair Cooper concluded by thanking the witnesses for their testimonies.



Professional Staff

Michael Ardovino

Policy Analyst

Danielle Ashbahian

Chief of Public Affairs

Susan Bishai

Policy Analyst

Mollie Blum

Researcher

Elizabeth K. Cassidy

Senior Strategic Advisor

Mingzhi Chen

Acting Supervisory Policy Advisor

Patrick Greenwalt

Policy Analyst

Sema Hasan

Policy Analyst

Thomas Kraemer

Chief Administrative Officer

Veronica McCarthy

Public Affairs Associate

Hilary Miller

Researcher

Nora Morton

Operations Specialist

Dylan Schexnaydre

Researcher

Jamie Staley

Acting Director of Research and Policy

Scott Weiner

Supervisory Policy Analyst

Luke Wilson

Researcher

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.