

Intolerance in India

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [October 5, 2010](#) issue

Over the past 20 years the worldwide persecution of Christians has entered the consciousness of American believers. Religious freedom has become a potent rallying cry. That is an excellent development—provided we avoid turning the issue into a partisan weapon in the confrontation between Christianity and Islam. While those two faiths often do encounter each other violently, most world religions, including those faiths that Westerners view quite favorably, have their own disturbing records of persecution and violence.

India, in particular, has a troubled record on religious freedom, and the offenders are Hindus, not Muslims. And the violence seems bound to increase.

India's importance on the global stage needs no stressing. Within two decades it will be the world's most populous nation. Its surging economy is racing to catch up with China's. It also has a significant Christian population—officially about 25 million, but quite possibly close to 40 million. That large discrepancy in numbers points to a major gap in India's vaunted record of multifaith tolerance.

Although the Christian presence in India is ancient, much of its expansion has occurred over the past century or so. That recent growth points to major internal tensions within Hinduism, especially in matters of caste. The most pressing issue concerns the so-called untouchables, the Dalits or Oppressed, a vast community that comprises anywhere from 150 to 250 million people. Although legal discrimination against these people has been outlawed since 1950, Dalits still suffer from appalling persecution and violence.

Why don't Dalits simply leave the Hindu fold altogether? Many have, in fact, tried to. Successive movements for Dalit rights have threatened to lead mass conversions to some other religion free of the blight of caste, whether that be Islam, Buddhism or Christianity. Christian evangelists have won their greatest successes among people of low caste or no caste. Yet Indian officials often refuse to recognize such conversions and continue to list those would-be defectors as faithful Hindus.

Christian Dalits face other burdens. Through the years, Indian governments have tried to assist Dalits by a kind of affirmative-action program, setting aside government jobs and contracts for people from disadvantaged castes. But such blessings can be received only if the people in question remain notionally Hindu. Government agencies exercise intrusive surveillance to ensure that Dalits are not drifting away to—for instance—Christian churches. Therefore Dalits who do convert condemn themselves and their families to penury.

Under the influence of Hindu extremists, some cities and states have banned conversions or raised many legal obstacles for converts. Typically, such laws take the form of prohibiting "conversion from one religion to another by use of force or allurement or by fraudulent means." (The key issue is the interpretation of the word *fraudulent*.) The main target of such measures is Christian evangelism. We can only guess how much larger India's Christian population would be if not for these crushing legal disabilities.

Fears that Christians might make still deeper inroads among the poorest go far toward explaining the recurrent mob violence directed against churches—actions that often occur with the tacit acquiescence of local police and government. Hundreds of churches have been destroyed and thousands of Christians either slaughtered or subjected to forced reconversions to Hinduism. Some states, especially the eastern territory of Orissa, have witnessed a prolonged reign of anti-Christian terror, most acutely in 2007-08. Given India's extraordinary global importance, it is surprising that such events receive relatively little media coverage in the West.

But that discreet silence is as nothing compared to the near-total Western ignorance of the Maoist Naxalite movement, a vast and heavily armed insurgency that operates in over 40 percent of India's territory. This expanding insurgency is very bad news for Christian minorities. In Orissa and elsewhere, Naxalites assassinate Hindu extremists and religious leaders, whom they regard, plausibly enough, as fascist enemies. Such attacks often provoke Hindus to retaliate against Christians—who are much easier and safer to victimize than are the aggressive Maoists. That was how the pogroms began in 2007.

There is no evidence that the Naxalite assassination campaign is going to diminish. Christians, already threatened by Hindu assaults, find themselves the victims of severe collateral damage in a war with no apparent outcome in our lifetimes.

By all means, let us show concern for Christian victims of despotisms and of Muslim theocracies. But let us also remember Christians persecuted by democratic states that we normally regard as our friends.