

India's Christians see rise in attacks against them

by [Arielle Dreher](#) in the [June 24, 2015](#) issue

Each day, children on their way to Mount Carmel School in New Delhi pass through gates under the watch of armed security guards and city police officers after a nearby Catholic convent and school were broken into.

The vandals stole money, tampered with security cameras, and ransacked the principal's office on February 13. The attack was the sixth this year in an ongoing series targeting Christian communities and schools across India.

The attack spurred Prime Minister Narendra Modi to address the growing safety concerns of India's Christians, who make up 2.3 to 2.5 percent of the population. Modi immediately asked the Delhi police commissioner to investigate the attacks.

"Government will not allow any religious group, belonging to the majority or the minority, to incite hatred against others overtly or covertly," he said. "Mine will be a government that gives equal respect to all religions."

But even after Modi's address, the attacks continued. In March, an elderly nun was raped in Kolkata, West Bengal, and a Christian school in West Bengal received anonymous threats, according to a *Times of India* report. In April, St. Mary's Church in Agra, Uttar Pradesh, was vandalized, setting off a wave of protests.

In May, the annual report of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom cited an "increase of harassment and violence" toward India's Christians.

India's Christian schools are largely Hindu. Of Mount Carmel's 2,500 students, for example, 75 percent are Hindu, 17 percent are Christian, and fewer than 2 percent are Muslim. There are some Buddhist students as well. Most of the teachers also are not Christians.

Gauri Viswanathan, a professor in the humanities at Columbia University, has studied the ongoing discourse on conversion in India for decades.

Violence against Christians is not a new phenomenon, she said, pointing out that proselytizing in Christian schools was not as overt as perhaps imagined, even back

in the 19th century.

“This is a deep-seated fear,” she said. “Even the East India Company would not allow missionaries into India until 1813. Literacy through a Christian lens meant reading and learning English through Milton or other Christian scholars.”

Today, the curriculum focuses on academic achievement. Teachers such as Karthika Paul at Mount Carmel say they can instill a sense of values in their students without a religious framework. Paul focuses on producing students who can “overcome evil with good, forgive, and be good citizens with good integrity.”

The school has a mandatory assembly each morning that includes a speaker and “Songs of Praise,” which include devotional hymns that translate across a variety of religions.

Ankita Singh, an 11th-grade student, said she wasn’t sure she would embrace Christianity.

“My mom is a Christian and my dad is Hindu, so I am figuring out my faith,” she said. “It will come later, in its time.”

Many of the students say they enjoy the morning worship as a time to venerate their own deities.

While the current Bharatiya Janata Party government voices strong support for minority groups, it draws the line at conversion. Tarun Vijay, an elected member of the upper house of Parliament in India and a member of the BJP, said he was one of the first to stand up for equal rights for Christians, citing Jesus as one of the best examples of love. But proselytizing in Christian schools concerns Vijay.

Conversion, he said, is a remnant of colonial rule. “We firmly believe that converting Hindus to Islam or Christianity is a political movement that started with the British,” Vijay said.

He cited groups such as the Dalit Christians, who were ostracized by Indian society and vulnerable to missionaries as easy converts. He said that these conversions are a threat to Hinduism.

John Thatamanil, a theology and world religions professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, said that postindependence India has not had issues with

proselytizing in Christian schools.

“You would have to look hard to find Christian schools as a means to proselytize,” he said.

At Mount Carmel, Principal Vijay Williams does not hesitate to explain his personal affinity for Christianity to visitors and students alike, even if he does not encourage sermonizing.

“Students are not forced to convert or even take a Bible class,” he said. “God converts them—we don’t convert them.”

Williams has reservations about the current government despite its response to the break-in. He cited secularism, defined in Articles 21 and 25 of the Indian Constitution, as a basis for Modi’s condemnation of violence against minorities.

“It is not a question of you standing with us,” Williams said. “It is a question of you standing with the Constitution.” —Religion News Service

*This article was edited on June 9, 2015.*