

Unequal dharmas

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [June 8, 2016](#) issue



Flags of the Bharatiya Janata Party. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Al Jazeera English](#).

Sarva Dharma Sama Bhava: “All dharmas [truths, or religions] are equally valid.” Indians often cite this noble maxim, which was popularized by Mahatma Gandhi, and the country’s constitution remains firmly secular and democratic. In recent years, though, the country’s religious outlook has darkened to the point that minorities—including both Christians and Muslims—face dangers of severe persecution and violence.

The fact that that threat receives little attention in the West says much about our stereotypes of other world religions. If we saw a situation where tens of millions of Christians were being similarly maltreated by a Muslim regime, Western media and policy makers would speak out vigorously. But when the enemies of religious liberty are Hindu, members of a faith that Americans idealize, the public silence is deafening.

Although India’s Christians do not represent a large proportion of the country’s vast population—only about 3 percent—they number about 40 million, comparable to the larger European nations. India’s Christians suffer from multiple disadvantages, especially because so many derive from people of low or no caste or from tribal communities on the margins of Hindu society. Official reluctance to accept the reality of conversions makes it difficult to assess the true extent of Christian numbers.

As Hindu extremism and the ideology of *Hindutva* has swelled over the past quarter century, militants have repeatedly attacked Christian churches and communities. Many deaths and injuries have resulted, as well as forced conversions. In some states and regions, militias and mobs act in close connivance with local authorities and police.

Hard-line Hindu attitudes find a political face in the Bharatiya Janata Party, the Indian People's Party (or BJP), which in 2014 won a historic triumph in the national elections, with almost a third of the popular vote, making Narendra Modi the prime minister.

The fact that so many Indians vote for the BJP does not of itself signify a rising tide of bigotry. The party owed its upsurge to possibly vain hopes that it would implement much needed economic reforms. Yet that political victory sparked an alarming escalation of extremist rhetoric and activism. That in turn encouraged Hindu extremist groups far to the right even of the BJP, including some founded in imitation of European fascism.

Militants have long focused on the issue of conversion, alleging that anyone who wished to abandon Hinduism was doing so because of improper threats or promises by cynical foreign missionaries. In response, jurisdictions passed laws to limit "fraudulent" conversions, ensuring that churches and believers would be tied up for years in court proceedings. More recently, extremists have projected their opposition to conversion into the remote past, suggesting that any Indians belonging to "foreign" religions—including Christianity—were descended from people wrongly lured away from the true (Hindu) faith, so that their descendants must be returned to their spiritual home. The ultimate goal, voiced with varying degrees of frankness, is a fully Hindu India.

Extremist claims have moved from spurious allegations of abuses by missionaries to a wholesale rejection of the presence of "non-Indian" religions on Indian soil. That approach not only justifies attacks on mosques and churches but gives such acts a patriotic legitimacy. Christianity has had a presence in the subcontinent since the late first century. India also has the world's second-largest Muslim population, with 170 million adherents. So much for these faiths being "non-Indian."

The Modi government has spoken officially in support of minorities, but that message does not reflect matters on the ground. The last two years have witnessed

numerous attacks on places of worship, including the notorious torching of a well-known Catholic church in East Delhi. Scarcely less disturbing have been large public ceremonies at which thousands of Christians and Muslims have celebrated a “reconversion” to Hinduism, a “return home,” and a public repudiation of foreign faith.

Even Christmas has become an ideological battleground. Across much of Asia, Western-style Christmas has become a very popular holiday for people of all religions, including Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. Secular Indian regimes of bygone decades had no problem making it a public holiday to respect the wishes of the country’s loyal Christian citizens. The Modi regime, though, created a new Good Governance Day to be celebrated on December 25, marking the birthdays of past Hindu worthies. If Christmas itself is too well established to be eradicated, it can be annexed and shorn of Christian connotations.

Losing a Christmas holiday might be an insult to India’s Christians, but it would be bearable. Much worse is the rigid and intolerant ideology that such a campaign represents and its underlying goals. Even when the BJP loses power, those who hold such views will remain. India, in consequence, faces one of the world’s most severe and continuing assaults on religious freedom.