

Christians feel threat of Hindu nationalism

by [Aysha Khan](#) in the [November 6, 2019](#) issue

Watching some 50,000 of her fellow Indian Americans line up outside a Houston stadium on September 22 to see India's prime minister Narendra Modi take the stage at last month's Howdy Modi rally, Sarah Philips felt sick.

"As an Indian Christian who grew up in this city . . . I stand here disgusted that a man who is responsible for persecution against religious minorities, violence against Dalits, and so much more evil is standing in that stadium," Philips, an organizer with AZAAD Austin, declared into a megaphone at the protest she helped coordinate against the rally. "You are celebrating a man who has a singular view of what India is: a Hindu state. That view is violent, and you aren't celebrating us."

[Modi was in Houston to appear at a rally with President Donald Trump and other US political leaders, as well as to mark a major natural gas partnership between American and Indian companies.]

The opposition to Modi and his party's Hindu nationalist agenda has largely been framed as a conflict between Hindus and Muslims, who comprise India's largest minority. But Philips's family, which immigrated to Houston from the Indian state of Kerala in the 1970s, is Catholic.

From mob violence to anticonversion laws to clampdowns on churches, the effects of rising Hindu nationalism under Modi have left India's estimated 28 million Christians—who at 2.3 percent of the population make up the country's third-largest faith group—fearing for their future, too.

The opposition to Modi largely takes issue with the Hindu nationalist ideology of Hindutva espoused by the governing Bharatiya Janata Party. Critics also point to the spike in violence that India's Muslims have faced, from mob lynching to attacks in the name of protecting cows, Modi's recent revocation of the partial autonomy of Kashmir, which is still under an unprecedented communications blackout and lockdown that has lasted over 60 days, and his 2002 involvement in the brutal riots

that killed an estimated 2,000 people, most of whom were Muslims, in the state of Gujarat.

“Modi’s hands were stained in blood. He committed genocide against Muslims,” said Obed Manwatkar, a Christian missionary from Nagpur, India, who moved to Chicago two years ago. “So when he was elected I said, ‘Oh, the hatemonger is coming for us, too.’ They were taking their revenge on Muslims, and nowadays Christians are the secondary target also.”

The All India Christian Council reported three years ago that a new attack against Christians was reported every 40 hours. The situation does not seem to have improved in the years since. A report last month from the Alliance Defending Freedom, a Christian advocacy group, documented 218 incidents of anti-Christian violence in India, including more than 150 acts of mass violence, in the first eight months of 2019. In the last five years, the ADF has documented more than 1,000 acts of violence against Indian Christians.

In January, Open Doors International, an organization that works with persecuted Christians, published its annual World Watch List and ranked India as the tenth most dangerous country for Christians, sandwiched between Iran and Syria. Back in 2013, India ranked 31st. Its position has risen steadily since the BJP regained power in 2014.

Hindutva’s founder defined a Hindu nationalist as someone who equates the “homeland” with “the holy land,” explained Freedom from Religion Foundation’s Amit Pal, author of a forthcoming book on Hindu nationalism.

“That leaves two major religions out of the equation,” said Pal, who described himself as a cultural Hindu. “So Muslims and Christians are the no. 1 enemies, as well as secularists, which they see as a Western import.”

Jews, Bahá’ís, and Parsis make up much smaller communities in India. Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists are by no means immune to religious persecution, either, but Pal noted that followers of these Indic religions are inaccurately viewed by Hindu nationalists as “junior Hindus” because of their historic ties to Hinduism.

Muslims and Christians, though, are viewed with a special “contempt” as foreign interlopers or as “brainwashed” by colonizing forces, Manwatkar said.

“During Modi’s election there was a notion in the public that ‘Hey, our Hindu heartland is coming to power, so we will teach a lesson to Muslims and Christians,’” he said. “So now they kill Muslims in mob lynchings and they attack the churches in villages where the Christians are living.”

From January 2009 to October 2018, the Hate Crime Watch database documented violence related to religious bias in India and found that 90 percent of the reported incidents occurred after the BJP rose to power with Modi’s May 2014 election and 66 percent of the attacks were reported in states governed by the BJP. The incidents, which include violence related to interfaith couples, primarily targeted Muslims, but 14 percent of the incidents were against Christians.

Open Doors’ dossier on India reports that, according to information from church partners, about 12,512 Christians were physically attacked and ten were killed due to their faith last year.

Manwatkar said he himself had to push local police and politicians to file a complaint three times following incidents in his local Christian community, noting several brutal attacks on Christmas caroling parties.

An Indian pastor who works with Open Doors (which did not want his name made public to protect him) said, “When they attack the churches, demolish the churches and brutally beat up the pastors, the police and government agencies don’t pay attention and never write any FIR [police] reports against them. On the contrary, they book pastors and church leaders and evangelists as criminals who are doing the crime of conversion of Hindus to Christians.”

Advocates say anticonversion laws in eight Indian states have long been used to accuse Christians of “forcefully” converting individuals to Christianity. Some of these “religious freedom acts,” two of which passed under Modi’s tenure, criminalized religious conversion done by fraud, coercion, and inducement. Some states require individuals to apply for permission from the government 30 days before converting to a new religion.

Now, reports indicate that the BJP-led government is also preparing a nationwide anticonversion bill.

“There’s this fairly widespread false narrative that Hindus are being converted to Christianity en masse by bad Christian actors across the country, and that

India—either the government or the population—needs to do something to put a stop to this,” explained William Stark, who manages cases related to persecution of Christians throughout South Asia for the International Christian Concern. —Religion News Service; *Christian Century* staff