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DESTRUCTIVE LIES

Disinformation, speech that incites violence and
discrimination against religious minorities in India



This research has been commissioned by Open Doors
and conducted by researchers at the London School of
Economics and Political Science

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Methods

The research presented in this report was conducted during February and March 2021 by a research team trained in ethnographic data collection, trauma-informed interviewing and visual analysis in line with full Covid regulations and ethical frameworks of the British Sociological Association. Data was generated and collected through: observations in localities where there had been reported incidents of anti-Christian or anti-Muslim violence; in-depth interviews with ordinary Indian citizens who have been victims of discrimination and violence linked to their faith in India; interviews with local rights activists and experts on Christian and Muslim faith-based communities in India and visual evidence provided by them. All accounts which reference numbers of Christians or Muslims in particular regions in the data have been further triangulated via analysis of statistical data from the Indian Census (2011) as well as secondary data such as media and human rights reports. Names have been changed in order to protect our informants' identities. Our fieldwork documents multiple examples of exclusion, harassment, discrimination and violence against Christians and Muslims in India with a particular focus on the states of Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha. While we concentrated on examples of anti-Christian harassment and violence (which comprise six of the eight case studies in the report), we also followed up on several cases of anti-Muslim harassment, discrimination and violence (which comprise the two remaining case studies).

All photos are illustrative.



Headline findings

Daily life for many Christian and Muslim communities in urban and rural India has become an excruciating struggle to earn a living and practice their faith while also remaining alive and under the radar of the far-right Hindutva organizations that now dominate the Indian public and political sphere.

Everyday life

“Being in the wrong place at the wrong time” no longer covers the ways in which Christians and Muslims in India can end up being harassed, arrested, beaten, raped or dead. It is now frequently the case that violent squads or vigilante mobs of Hindutva men with connections to local and national politicians or ambitions to be noticed and rewarded by local or national politicians intrude into the homes and places of worship of these communities, looking to start violence and to cast the Christian and Muslim communities as instigators or perpetrators.

In line with this, our research found that *an atmosphere of deep trauma, fear and anxiety* pervades the Christian communities that we visited in rural areas, as well as many of the Christian and Muslim communities in medium-sized towns and villages and on the outskirts of larger cities. These fears and anxieties are based on thoroughly evidenced experiences of exclusion, discrimination, harassment, bullying, intimidation, violence and injustice. It would not be too far-fetched to say that the circumstances in which we found our research subjects living was one of imminent existential threat.

We understand all of these issues to be both directly faith-related since the discrimination and violence were targeted at those who wore small but overt symbols of their faith, carried Bibles, were attempting to meet in order to pray or to come together to celebrate faith-based and/or even secular events such as Christmas and Eid or even New Year or who were known to worship at a particular local church or mosque – and heightened by other protected characteristics such as Scheduled Caste (SC) or Scheduled Tribe (ST) status, gender and political orientation.

The advent of Covid-19

We have gathered evidence to suggest that while numbers of Christians and Muslims have participated whole-heartedly in relief work both in separate organizations and alongside some Hindu and Sikh peers, the volume and types of disinformation against these communities continue to rise and multiply. Images and tropes involving the denigration of Muslims and Christians, particularly a refusal to receive blood from transfusions given by them, refusal to be treated by Muslim doctors, a repeated

connection of them and their faith habits of prayer and worship with the spread of the virus, accusations that they deliberately infect Hindus and more, appear repeatedly on mainstream and social media platforms and apps, and only a small number of these are ever retracted or taken down. Meanwhile, the vigilante mob lynchings and attacks, state harassment, attempts to drive Muslims and Christians from their land and their homes, and censorship have not lessened, but are rather metamorphosing in new and disturbing ways.

A hostile state

The Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Ajay Bisht (also known as Yogi Adityanath) has consolidated his politics by frequently discriminating against Muslims and/or promoting a hardline Hindu majoritarian ideology. The dominance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the national level and Bisht’s success in Uttar Pradesh has emboldened Chief Ministers in other Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-states to promote similar hardline majoritarian politics. This kind of politics is not only prevalent in political discourse, but also translates to regressive laws (such as those seeking to punish Christians for ‘forced conversions’ or punish Muslims for ‘love jihad’). On the ground, various state actors such as district administrators, lower court judges, police officials and local government bureaucrats use loopholes and misuse procedural provisions to harass religious minority groups.

Role of mainstream and social media

The importance of media narratives is understood and mentioned repeatedly by perpetrators and victims alike. One of the first things that vigilante mobs do is to snatch phones so the victims are unable to document violence, while perpetrators unfailingly make digital records of their own violent actions and then post it to various social media platforms. These posts advertise the perpetrators to other Hindutva groups and politicians as bold Hindu nationalists and consolidate their reputation for safeguarding Hinduism. Second, they serve as a warning to the police that the groups do not see their violence as being against the law, or that vigilantism functions as a parallel law-outside-the-law. Third, they serve as a warning to other religious minority groups, a strong disincentive to practice their faith. Further, when incidents of violence and discrimination occur, mainstream media systematically exclude victims’ accounts from their reportage. Such decisions are often not the direct decision of beat reporters but rather reflect the ethos and say so of the institutional hierarchy which is either risk averse or loyal to powerful Hindutva organizations and parties. As a result, local television and newspapers who cover such instances often echo the version pushed by Hindutva mobs and vigilantes. In some instances where it is not possible to spin the incident against religious minorities, the media simply does not cover the incident.

Case studies¹

Our eight case studies document a range of harrowing experiences and are worth approaching with caution, particularly for those who might be triggered by accounts of discrimination, assault, murder, lynching, harassment and still-birth.

Case 1

In Ramnagara, Karnataka details the ordeal and search for justice of Pastor “Vipin”, his family and congregation during and following an attack by a mob of 25-30 Hindutva vigilantes, who barged into a prayer meeting chanting ‘Jai Shri Ram’ [Hail Lord Ram], locked the family and worshippers in, assaulted the pastor, his 13-year-old daughter and other worshippers who were from the SC community, and have continued to harass the family since.

Case 2

In a village in Madhya Pradesh, details the unbearable ordeal and struggle of an Adivasi² Christian woman, “Sunita”, who was eight months pregnant on the day when a vigilante mob of 25-30 Hindutva boys and men broke into the house where she was preparing a new year’s celebration with her relatives, assaulted the family, kicked her in the stomach and caused her to give birth to a still-born baby.

Case 3

In Garhwa, Jharkhand, recounts the traumatic grief, harassment and struggle of Adivasi Christian widow “Meera” whose Oraon Christian husband “Ravi”, a local laborer, was entrapped by a Hindutva mob on the pretext of buying an ox, beaten viciously, taunted and then left to die by the police at two different locations, but ultimately in a police station.

Case 4

In a small town in Malkangiri district of Odisha details the ordeal and subsequent harassment and resistance of a young SC Christian woman “Shilpa” whose father and brothers belong to the RSS and cleave to Hindutva identity, and who joined with a Hindutva mob led by a local SC RSS leader to attack Shilpa, pulling off her headscarf and dragging her with the local pastor and his wife to the police station under pretext of “forced conversion”.

Case 5

In a village in Malkangiri, Odisha, explains the ordeal and subsequent harassment of “Gagan”, an Adivasi Christian who was attacked by Hindus from three entire villages, comprising a vigilante mob of around 200 to 250 people, who came to his house and violently assaulted him and his whole family while they were praying. His mother and youngest sister (10 years of age) were beaten mercilessly.

Case 6

In southern Odisha, is one that has already found its way, albeit in entirely misinformed ways, into Indian mainstream media. It narrates the harrowing lynching-murder by young male Hindutva vigilantes of teenage Christian boy “Sukumar” and the torture, intimidation and violent assault of his cousins, and other local Christian families, in an unrelenting campaign spearheaded by the RSS to get them to convert/re-convert to Hinduism.

Case 7

In a medium sized farming village in Madhya Pradesh, narrates multiple key informant and witness accounts of the violence that broke out late December, 2020, when a far-right Hindutva youth group affiliated with the BJP organized an aggressive procession and rally to extort money for the building of the Ram Temple. Abuse was hurled at local Muslims, and when they responded verbally, a sword was drawn by members of the Hindu mob who used a police vehicle to attack the local mosque, and went on to bring in a surge of some 6000 Hindus who burnt a Muslim house and vehicles with complete impunity. Many affected Muslim families have subsequently faced arrest on false charges, been the butt of social media disinformation campaigns and harassed or ousted from their homes.

Case 8

In a small city in Madhya Pradesh, brings together multiple key informant and witness accounts of anti-Muslim discrimination, harassment and violence, from an aggressive procession by hundreds of young BJP affiliated men, belonging to Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (the youth wing of the BJP) to the targeting of Muslims through multiple events of social media disinformation by networks of the Hindu far right, the false arrest of local Muslims on trumped up charges and the illegal ousting of local Muslims from their homes and land at the behest of Hindutva activists acting in collusion with police, courts and land authorities.

¹All names have been changed and identifying information removed in order to protect the identities of the people in these case studies.

²The indigenous peoples or *Adivasis* comprise nearly nine per cent of India’s population, more than 100 million people. Adivasi refers not just to ethnic identity but also a specific political subjectivity, as a rightful and original owner of land and natural resources, a distinct way of life and so on. Recently, there has been some political momentum to reclaim Adivasi as a distinct religion in itself as well as a label for several Adivasi religions (such as Sarna).

Examples of exclusion against Christian and Muslim communities

Examples that we documented for our case studies, include but are not restricted to:

- a)** Refusal of other locals – including some relatives – with ties to Hindutva groups and organizations such as the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Akhil Bharatiya Vidhyarthi Parishad³ (ABVP) to speak up for or interact with Christian and Muslim families when they require support or help in regard to land disputes or other issues
- b)** Refusal to pass on vital information about attacks on Christians or Muslims to the police and law enforcement
- c)** Side-lining of Christian and/or Muslim events and/or requests for public space, the refusal of services and legal redress to Christian and Muslim families
- d)** Refusal to give some Christians the government services to which they are entitled by law or threat to suspend such services if they convert officially
- e)** Refusal by police and local legal infrastructures to acknowledge crimes committed against Christians and Muslims by Hindu attackers
- f)** Misuse of anti-conversion laws against those legitimately practicing their faith; the misuse of anti-conversion laws against those who hold one faith in official records but wish to attend Christian events in order to pray
- g)** Refusal of Panchayat⁴ leaders or local elders to step in on matters that affect the well-being of Christian or Muslim villagers
- h)** Pressure placed on Christians and Muslims from Dalit/Adivasi groups to reconvert to Hinduism if they wish to secure jobs or be part of everyday life in their communities rather than being shunned (*Ghar Wapsi*)

³ The RSS organization was founded in 1925 and currently has more than a million members. Its mission is to work towards a Hindu nation. The current ruling political party, BJP emerged from the RSS in 1985. Many other organizations have also similarly 'spun off' from the RSS to serve more specialized functions. For example, the ABVP is a student organization geared to mobilizing the Hindutva ideology in universities across the country. Together, these organizations are commonly referred to as the Sangh Parivar, or the Sangh family. The ideology of Hindu supremacy is founded on the dominance of 'upper' castes over other 'lower' castes internal to Hinduism and the dominance over religious minorities who are othered and external to Hinduism.

⁴ The word *Panchayat* translates literally to a council of five and in practical terms, it refers to a form of self-government at the village level in India. Panchayat members are elected once every five years by residents of villages that come under that Panchayat. Once elected, the members then elect the Panchayat President, while the state governments appoint officials to administer the Panchayat and to support the President.



Examples of bullying, harassment, violence and perversion of justice against Christian and Muslim individuals and communities

The examples that we documented in our case studies include but are not restricted to:

- a)** Collusion of local law enforcement with lynch-mobs who hail from the Hindu community and are either in or are supportive of Hindutva groups and politics
- b)** Use of legal means to threaten or arrest the Christian and Muslim victims/survivors of Hindu mob attacks
- c)** Demands that evidence of attacks be provided by the victims/survivors even when the attackers have filmed the entire sequence and/or uploaded it to social media
- d)** Deliberate refusal to accept, and/or deliberate loss and destruction of compelling evidence of violence and aggression against Christians and Muslims
- e)** Speech and images inciting violence against Christians and Muslims circulated and verbalized by mobs before, during and after attacks on Christians and Muslims
- f)** Speech inciting violence against Christians and Muslims verbalized by police and law enforcement officials during and in the aftermath of attacks
- g)** Derogatory and dehumanizing comments about the jobs, knowledge levels, personal attributes and food habits of Muslims and Christians (particularly Dalit and Adivasi groups) made by police, law enforcement officials and politicians
- h)** Refusal by police and law enforcement to arrest or deter mobs from physically intimidating and violating the property and persons of Christians and Muslims
- i)** Physical attacks by violent Hindutva mobs on the persons, property and vehicles owned by, or leased to and occupied by Christian and Muslim persons and communities
- j)** Arson against places of worship for Christians; arson against the possessions – for instance books and religious texts – of Christians and Muslims
- k)** Intimidation and death threats against Christian and Muslim victims of Hindutva violence in order to prevent them from seeking justice
- l)** Repeat attacks on the those who actively resist the violence – for instance human rights workers and religious-aligned activists of Christian and Muslim upliftment organizations
- m)** Unfair arrest and legal cases against those Christians and Muslims who report ongoing violence or harassment against them
- n)** False allegations as well as speech and images which incite violence circulated against Christians and Muslims in social media groups
- o)** False allegations against the Christian and Muslim victims printed in local and regional newspapers
- p)** Disinformation about Christians and Muslims, their practices, their culture and their loyalty to the Indian nation circulated widely on social media by Hindutva groups and supporters;
- q)** Disinformation about Christians and Muslims, their practices, their culture and their loyalty to the Indian nation circulated through political speeches by Hindu politicians at all levels of local, national and state government;
- r)** Fear-mongering, stereotyping, dehumanization, discrimination and incitement to violence, propaganda and misinformation against Christian and Muslim communities pertaining to aspects of civic life (such as Covid, cleanliness and or fertility/birth-rates) spoken and published by national politicians
- s)** Intimidation of Hindu friends/neighbors/legal representatives who take up cases on behalf of, or attempt to give witness on behalf of Muslim and Christian victims
- t)** Intimidation via advertisements and political hoardings around elections
- u)** deliberate and targeted sexual harassment of girls/women members of these communities with the aim of humiliation and “defilement”
- v)** Collusion of local municipal officials in the demolition of Muslim and/or Christian homes
- w)** Collusion of landlords in ousting Christian or Muslim tenants who have been accused of crimes (which they did not commit)

Factors exacerbating trauma and ongoing discrimination

Notably, the examples of exclusion, discrimination, harassment and violence we documented show a strong collusion between Hindutva state and non-state actors in mobilizing, orchestrating, legitimizing and/or covering-up harassment, bullying, violence and discrimination against Indian Christians and Muslims. This is particularly stark in rural areas, where the Christians and/or Muslims affected also belong to Adivasi or Dalit communities, and have few economic, social and political resources. Literacy rates amongst some of these populations are low, particularly amongst women, smartphone ownership is often confined to male heads of households and/or older relatives, and the legal proceedings that they are tied up in when their aggressors file cases against them can be prohibitively expensive to defend.

Multiple harms to well-being, life and livelihood

Harms suffered by Christians and Muslims in India as documented for this report include but are not restricted to:

- a)** Loss of life, bereavement, physical injury due to practicing their faith or accusations connected to their faith-based identities
- b)** Panic, anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation about the consequences of continuing publicly in their faith-based identities
- c)** Job loss, financial loss through loss of property and/or work opportunities due to practicing their faith or connection to a faith-based identity
- d)** Separation from family members because of intimidation and fear around their faith
- f)** Children growing up in fear due to parents' faith-based identities or practices
- g)** Fear of practicing their faith openly, fear of encountering violence for wearing symbols of faith (e.g. beards, skull-caps, headscarves, veils, habits, crosses)
- h)** Low self-esteem and sense of isolation experienced because of multiple forms of misinformation against their faith communities
- i)** Political disenfranchisement and fear of voting
- j)** Repeated humiliation and dehumanization in front of fellow-citizens, fellow villagers, relatives, friends, co-workers through unwanted touch, shoving, hitting, verbal abuse and neglect
- k)** A sense that they are endangering others through their faith and hence a need to get rid of external symbols or markers of faith

Resources and support for victims of faith-based discrimination and violence

The research team was often moved to tears by the terrible pain and ongoing tragedy endured by the participants in this study, and by their incredible strength of spirit in the face of their seemingly insurmountable problems. We were, however, disturbed by the lack of institutional care, solidarity and redress from larger churches in other denominations, and the notable refusal of established Indian media to give a balanced perspective on these cases. Christian and Muslim faith communities and individuals are often from extremely economically underprivileged backgrounds. Amongst both communities their faith-based practice often gives them grounds for survival and hope despite the social and political suffering that they are enduring. We were told repeatedly that trust in God (Jesus, Allah, the Creator) was a source of comfort and strength to those who had been targeted by mobs, or who had suffered discrimination and other challenges in their lives (such as addiction or illness). In Christian communities in particular there was a strong sense that their *faith was being tested* by all of the violence and dehumanization set against them.

Resistance and redress

Actions taken by Christians and Muslims in India to contest and defend themselves against the discrimination and violence levelled at them from the highest echelons of the ruling political party to mobs affiliated with or mobilized by far-right Hindutva organizations include but are not restricted to:

- a)** Reporting the abuse and violence they face to the police
- b)** Trying to register legal cases against the perpetrators
- c)** Trying to persuade local politicians such as village elders, Panchayat leaders and local magistrates to take up their cause
- d)** Contacting local, regional and national human rights organizations for support
- e)** Trying to tell their stories to the mainstream and alternative media
- f)** Continuing to practice their faith in private or in public
- g)** Setting up their own networks of solidarity, support and sustenance to prevent incidents of arson and violence planned by the Hindutva groups from coming to fruition
- h)** Setting up and running databases of violent crimes against their faith communities

Recommendations for the international community and international financial organizations

- 1** The international community should immediately convene an **international fact-finding commission** of violence and other human rights violations against religious minorities in India. The commission is to consider already documented cases and create an international monitoring mechanism including proper on-the-ground documentation training for both government and civil society members who are expected to participate in documenting instances of violence, intolerance, and discrimination against India's diverse religious minorities.
- 2** International civil society organizations working on preventing violence against religious minorities with support from researchers and grassroots activists should **convene an international cross-platform commission** to document new and emerging formulations of discrimination, dehumanization, disinformation and incitement against Christians and Muslims in English, Hindi, and all of India's vernacular languages in order to better sanction those circulating these on Social Media Platforms.
- 3** The international community should **compile an exhaustive database** of violence, discrimination and other human rights violations against minorities in India and **offer pro-bono support** by international legal teams to all of the victims/survivors regardless of their financial means.
- 4** All international financial organizations and international private investors who provide loans to or do business with the Indian government should **take cognizance of the status of ongoing human rights violations**, including pogroms and mob violence, against Christians, Muslims and other religious minorities in India, and **link business and investment opportunities to the respect of the human rights of all Indians**, including the inalienable right to hold, change and practice a religion or belief.
- 5** The international community should **make the respect of the human rights of all Indians**, including all religious minorities, **conditional to any aid and/or trade agreement** and **establish monitoring mechanisms** ensuring that such conditions are respected.
- 6** The international community should **urgently censure far-right Hindutva state and non-state actors in India** who play a role in encouraging, participating in, legitimizing and profiting from violence and discrimination against Christians and Muslims.
- 7** **Any Indian politician or member of the police force and judiciary found to have colluded** in anti-Christian and/or anti-Muslim pogroms, lynching, incitement, violence and other human rights violations **should be brought to justice** by both national and international law enforcement agencies, **tried and held accountable**.

Recommendations for social media corporations and media outlets

- 1** Corporations who own social media urgently need to **increase the number of moderators who can address specific local issues of discrimination, harassment and violence** circulating on their platforms and apps. Just as Facebook has undertaken an overhaul of its algorithms and tripled the size of their moderation team to identify and address racialized inciting speech against Black groups in the US, we recommend that all major social media companies vastly increase the size of their moderation team specifically to address discriminatory and inciting speech against religious minorities in India.
- 2** **All teams of content moderators** for social media companies **should have high competence in regional languages, receive training on international human rights standards** and be familiarized with the complex and diverse uses of Hindi, English, regional languages and dialects, and images, GIFs and memes to disguise disinformation, provocation, and incitement to violence and discrimination against Christians, Muslims and other minorities.
- 3** Corporations which own social media must **train their content moderation teams on the histories of interreligious relations and the patterns of media and social media coverage around the time of discriminatory and violent events, pogroms and mob violence** so they are able to protect the speech of users who counter misinformation and inciting speech, while taking down speech that incites to violence and discrimination against religious minorities, in line with Article 20 of the ICCPR.⁵
- 4** **Those reporting news nationally and internationally** - both from within India and from outside the country - **must receive religious literacy training**, with a focus on raising awareness of how the voices of ethnic and religious minorities may be missing, under- and even mis-reported in major media outlets.
- 5** **Social media companies should constitute special interest groups** (similar to Facebook's Oversight Board) consisting of experts and representatives of different groups who have faced historical exclusion and violence in India (including religious minority groups) and empower them to shape the platform's content policies and community standards.
- 6** All corporations who own social media must **upgrade the recruitment and training of their AI teams** with regard to the Indian social media sphere, international human rights standards, and overhaul their algorithms to specifically address dehumanization, discriminatory and inciting speech against religious minority groups in India and South Asia more broadly. This includes, but is not limited to, the ways in which caste and gender identity intersect with religious identity.
- 7** Violence against religious minorities is enabled by the mobilization of mobs who openly discuss their plans and make their intentions clear on platforms and cross platform apps where the content is publicly visible and accessible. All corporations who own social media **must immediately take down content that exceeds the threshold of advocacy of religious hatred according to Article 20 of the ICCPR** and suspend the offending user account across linked platforms to send a discouraging message to other users, networks and groups who may be similarly inclined.
- 8** While there are significant challenges with addressing encrypted speech (for instance on WhatsApp and Telegram), we recommend that at the very least, social media companies begin by **acting urgently on unencrypted speech that is publicly available on their platforms and that violates Article 20 ICCPR**: Facebook, Instagram, You Tube, TikTok and ShareChat. In many cases, users circulating inciting speech on messaging apps also have associated accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. where similar speech can be observed. In such cases, those users can be warned and/or suspended for repeated violations.

⁵ See <https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>



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