

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom
732 N. Capitol Street, N.W.
Suite A714
Washington, DC 20401

Dear USCIRF Commissioners,

We, the undersigned, are a group of organizations and individuals, advocates, scholars, faith leaders, practitioners and non-practitioners that share a sentiment that religious freedom is at the very core of human rights and liberties. We are grateful for the Commission's focus on emphasizing religious freedom as a key component in United States foreign policy, and we look forward to continuous collaboration in the new year. We humbly request that you consider raising the issue of various new anti-religious conversion legislations that are being implemented in states across India and that are being used to undermine religious freedom of India's men, and in particular, women.

Within the past few months, the Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, and Madhya Pradesh have each introduced problematic legislation which they allege are to combat a phenomenon they call 'love jihad' – an unproven conspiracy theory that Indian Muslim men are tempting Hindu women into marriage with the intent of forcefully converting them to Islam. Uttar Pradesh's Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance contains vague language that criminalizes "fraudulent" religious conversion with un-bailable imprisonment for up to ten years; Madhya Pradesh's Freedom of Religion Ordinance prohibits "misrepresentation", "allurement", and "coercion" as means to convert another individual's religion.

While the legislation itself appears to protect India's civilians, primarily women, from being unwittingly or wittingly coerced into converting religions, the often-problematic application of these laws has been condemned by human rights organizations worldwide. In essence, these anti-conversion ordinances revoke a woman's freedom to convert religions and marry whomever she chooses, as well as call into question her capacity to make her own spiritual and marital decisions.

In some reported cases, a father or male relative of an Indian woman accuse her boyfriend or fiancé of luring the woman into a marriage with the intent of converting her to Islam. These accusations are filed regardless of whether the woman's relationship with her partner is legitimate. For instance, in late December 2020, a Muslim teenage boy was arrested under Uttar Pradesh's ordinance after the father of his female classmate accused the boy of "induc[ing] the girl to elope with him" and convert to Islam. Without any evidence or a statement from the girl in question, authorities arrested the teenage boy under both the anti-conversion ordinance and under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act.¹

In other cases, Indian authorities and radicals will interrupt weddings ceremonies and registrations because they either allegedly have cause to believe that a woman is being coerced to marry and convert, or in an effort to stop interfaith marriages. On 2 December, police in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, interrupted a wedding between Hindu woman Raina Gupta and her Muslim fiancé Mohammad Asif. Though the couple's union appeared to be legitimate, and though the family of both the bride and groom were supportive of the wedding and informed the police that no religious

¹ Al Jazeera, "[Another BJP-governed Indian state plans anti-conversion law](#)", 26 December 2020.

conversion was to take place, authorities still prevented the ceremony from concluding.² In a separate incident in Uttar Pradesh, a 22-year-old pregnant Hindu woman named Muskan was detained for marrying a Muslim man and subsequently converting to Islam. When she and her husband, Rashid, went to formally register their marriage, Rashid was sent to prison and Muskan to a shelter home, where she suffered a miscarriage a trimester into her pregnancy. The couple, though in a loving and legitimate marriage, were reported by a group of right-wing activists for allegedly violating the Prohibition of Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance.³ As a community, we condemn forced religious conversions of girls and women; however we believe that ‘love jihad’ legislations are not a proper counter to abductions and forced conversions as they are being used as means to legitimize honor-related violence and interfere with legitimate marriages and religious conversions

On 4 January, for the first time since the implementation of the ordinance in Uttar Pradesh, a Christian individual was arrested along with three other Indian civilians for allegedly engaging in fraudulent evangelism and violating the new legislation. South Korean Christian woman Mi Kyung Lee was travelling with a group of Indian aid workers – Umesh Kumar, Seema, and Sandhya when the group was accused by two women of offering money in exchange for conversion to Christianity. The coordinator of the aid workers, Raj Kumar Masih, pointed out that the accusations were baseless; not even all of the four people arrested were Christian and therefore would not partake in Christian proselytism. Moreover, Masih offered to provide the contact information of the group’s donation recipients, who he explained would confirm that they were not bribed to convert religions.⁴

This persecutory and discriminatory application of such anti-conversion laws tears away at the diversity and religious pluralism of India, the world’s largest democracy. We would once again like to express our gratitude to the Commission for its advocacy on religious freedom, and especially for its recommendation to the United States Department of State that India be designated as a Country of Particular Concern with regards to its violations of religious freedom. We respectfully request that, in continuation of this rhetoric on India, the Commission publicly raises the above issues in a statement condemning the arbitrary arrests of individuals under regional anti-conversion laws in India.

With deepest appreciation for your attention to these matters,

Organizations

American Humanist Association

Buddhist Solidarity Association

Center for Pluralism

Christian Freedom International

² Apoorvanand, “India’s ‘love jihad’ laws: Another attempt to subjugate Muslims”, *Al Jazeera*, 15 January 2021.

³ S Raju, “Woman detained under UP’s new law against ‘love jihad’ suffers miscarriage”, *Hindustan Times*, 13 December 2020.

⁴ Morning Star News, “First Christian Arrested under New ‘Anti-Conversion’ Law in U.P., India”, 4 January 2021.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide UK

Church of Scientology National Affairs Office

Congolese Integration Network

Coordination des Associations et des Particuliers pour la Liberté de Conscience (CAP)

Faith & Liberty D.C.

Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations (FIACONA)

Global Christian Ministers Federation

International Christian Concern

Jubilee Campaign

Katartismos Global (KGI Global)

New Wineskins Missionary Network

Red Eagle Enterprises

Revealing Light Ministries

Save the Persecuted Christians

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