

The Modi Government and Religious Freedom

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CONTEXT

India's population is approximately 1.39 billion (2023 estimate), making it the second-most populous country in the world. The religious affiliation of India's population is 80 percent Hindu, 14 percent Muslim, 2 percent Christian, 2 percent Sikh, and 2 percent other.

India gained independence from the United Kingdom on August 15, 1947. India's Constitution opens with words stating that the country is both a republic and a democracy. In the preamble of its constitution, India is described as a "sovereign socialist secular democratic republic." India has a powerful national government, but states vary in a substantial number of laws.

Article 25 of India's constitution grants all individuals freedom of conscience, including the right to "practice, profess, and propagate religion."

Since 2014, the *Bhartiya Janata Party* (BJP), a Hindu nationalist party, has controlled India's central government. At the national, state, and local levels, they have substantially damaged India's democratic principles by persecuting the country's religious minorities, including Muslims, Christians, and to an extent, Sikhs. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has long been associated with extreme Hindu nationalist policies. In 2002, in the Gujarat State on India's west coast, two train cars carrying Hindus returning from a religious pilgrimage were set on fire at Godhra. Fifty-seven people were killed, mostly Hindus. Although it was never officially proven that Muslims started the fire or that the fire was accidental, the state government responded violently with over 900 Muslims killed and at least 150,000 displaced by rioting. Modi, who was then Gujarat Chief Minister, used the riots as a campaign tool for

his successful reelection as he affirmed that India was a Hindu nation. Since becoming prime minister, Modi actions have drawn substantial negative international attention.

Freedom House is a highly respected organization founded on the conviction that freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people. Published since 1973, "Freedom in the World" is *Freedom House's* flagship annual report, assessing the status of political rights and civil liberties throughout the world. "Freedom in the World" reports annually categorize countries as "Free," "Partially Free," and "Unfree." Countries and territories scores include a combination of "Political Rights" scores and "Civil Liberties" scores. The higher the score, the freer the country. For years, India was classified as "Free," but this is no longer the case. India was categorized as "Partially Free" in the 2023 "Freedom in the World" report that included 210 countries and territories. India's score was sixty-six out of 100. India was last categorized as "Free" in 2020.

Narendra Modi: Early Life and Political Career



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Narendra Modi, in full Narendra Damodardas Modi, (born September 17, 1950, Vadnagar, India), is an Indian politician and government official who rose to become a senior leader of the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP). In 2014, he led his party to victory in elections to the *Lok Sabha* (lower chamber of the Indian parliament), after which he was sworn in as Prime Minister of India. Prior to that he had served (2001–2014) as Chief Minister (Head of

Government) of Gujarat state in western India.

Modi was raised in a small town in northern Gujarat, and he completed an MA degree in political science from Gujarat University in Ahmadabad. He joined the pro-Hindu *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) organization in the early 1970s and set up a unit of the RSS's students' wing, the *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad*, in his area. Modi rose steadily in the RSS hierarchy, and his association with the organization significantly benefited his subsequent political career.

Modi joined the BJP in 1987, and a year later he was made the General Secretary of the Gujarat branch of the party. He was instru-

mental in greatly strengthening the party's presence in the state in succeeding years. In 1990 Modi was one of the BJP members who participated in a coalition government in the state, and he helped the BJP achieve success in the 1995 state legislative assembly elections that in March allowed the party to form the first-ever BJP-controlled government in India. The BJP's control of the state government was relatively short-lived, however, ending in September 1996.

In 1995 Modi was made the secretary of the BJP's national organization in New Delhi, and three years later he was appointed its general secretary. He remained in that office for another three years, but in October 2001 he replaced the incumbent Gujarat chief minister, fellow BJP member Keshubhai Patel, after Patel had been held responsible for the state government's poor response in the aftermath of the massive Bhuj earthquake in Gujarat earlier that year that killed more than 20,000 people. Modi entered his first-ever electoral contest in a February 2002 by-election that won him a seat in the Gujarat state assembly.

Modi's political career thereafter remained a mixture of deep controversy and self-promoted achievements. His role as chief minister during communal riots that engulfed Gujarat in 2002 was particularly questioned. ♦

Source: Excerpts from "Narendra Modi," *Britannica*, <http://tinyurl.com/4p5xtjpy>.



February 19, 2023. Members of Christian community during the protest against rising hate and violence in New Delhi. © Shutterstock. By John1 107.

The Modi Government has been implicated in promoting Hindu nationalism in a variety of ways, such as state-supported anti-conversion laws. By February 2023, twelve of India’s twenty-eight states have passed anticonversion laws. Courts have ordered some states to pause enforcement of these laws, but some states are actively charging individuals.

Hindu mob attacks are now quite-common despite the Indian Supreme Court warning it could become the new normal. Hindu vigilante groups often attack Muslims who are rumored to kill or trade cows (many Hindus believe that cows are sacred). A *Human Rights Watch* Report indicates that at least forty-four people have been killed by the vigilantes.

The same organization reported that in February 2020, major protests occurred against The Citizenship (Amendment) Act to India’s constitution that reduced eligibility for citizenship for non-Muslims from eleven years of living and working in India to six, though it excluded Muslims from this amendment. On February 23, fifty-three protestors were killed in New Delhi, forty of them Muslim. Further violence and riots occurred. An independent investigation by the Delhi Minorities Commission reported to *Human Rights Watch* that police refused to stop the violence and filed cases against Muslim victims.

To be fair, readers should know that a significant number of Hindus, as well as India’s Supreme Court, at times have opposed Hindu nationalism. It is also quite difficult to obtain accurate information about many of the incidents involving Hindus and Muslims because conflicting accounts of what happened regularly occur. The frequency of disputed accounts of Christian persecution tend to be much lower.

The Modi government has condoned, or not intervened, in a dramatic rise in persecution of India’s 69.5 million Christians. Although they represent only 5 percent of India’s population, India’s Christians often include “Dalits,” formerly “Untouchables” in the caste system so the situation is particularly poignant. *Open Doors*, a Christian Support Organization active in over seventy countries, helps persecuted Christians. The organization publishes an annual ranking of fifty countries where

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Christians face the most extreme persecution. In 2023, India ranked eleventh in the world (The Sudan ranked tenth and Syria twelfth). Two excerpts from the most recent *Open Doors* report provide readers with an introductory overview of contemporary persecution of Christians in India. It is also useful to read the *Open Doors* explanation of the table.

Open Doors Annual Reports

Year	Christians Killed	Churches or Christian Buildings Attacked or Closed	Christians Physically or Mentally Abused	Christians Internally Displaced
2023	17	67	10,000*	834
2022	10	47	1,779	380

This table includes only a few categories of faith-based violence during the reporting period. For full results, see the violence section of the Full Country Dossier. Since many incidents go unreported, the numbers must be understood as minimum figures. In cases where it has been impossible to count exactly, a symbolic round figure (10*, 100*, or 1000*) is given, which in reality could be significantly higher.

Source: Open Doors, World Watch List 2023, India.

Christianity Today, and multiple corroborating sources, confirm that beginning in May 2023 in Manipur, a state in northeast India, violence that in some ways exceeded the *Open Doors* report occurred. Religious and ethnic violence has resulted in the deaths of at least 142 people, the destruction of over 300 churches and hundreds of villages, and one of the largest violence-driven internal displacements in recent Indian history. Violence has caused more than 65,000 people to flee their homes and seek shelter elsewhere.

L. Kamzang, a Delhi-based pastor working with refugees from Manipur, estimates as of September 2023 that had least 1,000 families are sheltering in that city. ♦

NOTES:

1. “The Constitution of India,” Legislative Department, accessed August 31, 2023, <https://tinyurl.com/4f7z6b29> (put page #)
2. Ibid.

Sources:

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