

INDIA REPRESSED CRITICAL VOICES: REPORT

Relevant for: Indian Polity | Topic: Indian Constitution - Features & Significant Provisions related to Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties

Saying religious freedom conditions in India had “significantly worsened” in 2021, the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), a bipartisan independent body, recommended, for the third year in a row, that India be designated a ‘Country of Particular Concern’ (CPC), the category of governments performing most poorly on religious freedom criteria.

The State Department, which has its own Office of International Religious Freedom, is not bound by the Commission’s recommendations and has not accepted the CPC recommendation for India for the two years.

“During the year, the Indian government escalated its promotion and enforcement of policies — including those promoting a Hindu-nationalist agenda — that negatively affect Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Dalits, and other religious minorities,” the report said.

Structural changes

“The government continued to systemise its ideological vision of a Hindu state at both the national and State levels through the use of both existing and new laws and structural changes hostile to the country’s religious minorities,” it said.

The report section on India said that the government had “repressed critical voices”, especially minority communities and individuals reporting on them.

It mentions the arrest of rights activist Khuran Pervez in Kashmir, and the July 2021 death of octogenarian Father Stan Swamy, arrested in October 2020 under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA).

The report touches on challenges faced by Non-Governmental Organisations, especially with regard to foreign funding and also highlights anti-conversion laws.

“In October 2021, Karnataka’s government ordered a survey of churches and priests in the State and authorised police to conduct a door-to-door inspection to find Hindus who have converted to Christianity,” the report said.

Other countries

Other countries recommended were: Afghanistan, Nigeria, Syria and Vietnam. USCIRF recommended that the State Department redesignate Myanmar, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan as CPCs.

The government has, previously, pushed back against the USCIRF’s grading, questioning its *locus standi*. In 2020, External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar called the Commission an “Organisation of Particular Concern.”

Mr. Jaishankar, who was in Washington two weeks ago for the 2+2 U.S.-India Defence and Foreign Ministry dialogue, said that the state of human rights in India had not been raised at the dialogue.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken had made the general point that the U.S. remains concerned about human right violations in India.

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