

Fears for British church leader accused of trying to convert Hindus in India

Pankaj Devnoor's family say he was charged under the Freedom of Religion Act 2026 – a law that doesn't take effect until next week – and have launched a funding appeal to bring him home

Namita Singh



Pankaj Devnoor has been accused of trying to convert non-Christians – an allegation his family called 'baseless' (*Pankaj Devnoor/Facebook*)

A British church leader is facing serious criminal charges in India after he was accused of trying to convert Hindus under a controversial and untested new law.

Pankaj Devnoor, 50, leads a Christian community in Manchester as part of the Anglican Episcopal Church International, and had travelled to Pune in western India to attend a 10-day celebration, involving sermons and religious songs, of the 141st anniversary of a church there.

But the gathering was interrupted and ultimately cut short on 7 August when a group of Hindu men entered the premises and accused Mr Devnoor of being a missionary trying to encourage religious conversion.

The case received widespread attention in Indian media because it made legal history as one of the first registered under Maharashtra state's new Freedom of Religion Act 2026. It's one of several state-level "anti-conversion" laws proposed by Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, whose opponents say it plays on fears that minority religious groups are targeting Hindus and forcing them to convert.

In an unexpected twist, it has since emerged that the new law was not actually in force at the time of Mr Devnoor's naming by police on an initial chargesheet, known in India as a First Information Report. Police have said they may yet pursue action against him under other laws, however, including breaching immigration rules.

Though he has not been arrested, Mr Devnoor's name and even address have been circulated in the Indian media and he has been granted bail on condition that he does not leave the country.

His family in the UK say the allegation that he was trying to convert local people to Christianity was "baseless". They say they are considering legal action against the police, and that they fear for his safety given what they have heard about how minority groups are treated in India.



An AI image of Pankaj Devnoor from the family's GoFundMe appeal. They are seeking to raise £10,000 to fight the case against him in India ([GoFundMe](#))

“Everything happened so quickly and so suddenly,” his daughter Manali Devnoor told *The Independent*. “They’d taken his phone away, so we couldn’t even really speak to him.”

Ms Devnoor says her father was attending a cultural programme at the Pavitranam Devalaya church in Pune when a group of people interrupted the event and accused the organisers of carrying out religious conversions.

“It was quite unpleasant, quite painful,” said Elvina Victor, a friend of Mr Devnoor. “There was a very peaceful religious activity which was going on, and suddenly it was interrupted, objected to and completely stopped.”

The case against Mr Devnoor was filed on the complaint of a rickshaw driver called Amit Raju Bhosale, 31, who claimed he had sought to spread “misconceptions” against Hinduism and “lure people in the audience into religious conversion”.

While Mr Devnoor was permitted to attend prayer meetings and participate in religious functions in India under his immigration

status as an overseas citizen of India, police said he could not preach or deliver a religious discourse without permission.

Deputy commissioner of police Prashant Amrutkar told *The Independent* that Mr Devnoor was “carrying out missionary activities”. DCP Amrutkar confirmed that Mr Devnoor was not detained. Asked if he faced arrest or deportation, he said: “The law will take its course.”

However, the court that granted interim bail to Mr Devnoor noted that “nowhere it was mentioned that in the said cultural programme they intended to convert persons of other religion”.

The court said it appeared that the group including the rickshaw driver had entered the church under the “misconception that it is a cultural programme for Hindus” and mistook a promotional picture of the church for a Hindu temple.

“Prima facie it appears that it was a programme of [the] Christian community,” said the court, adding that, while there was no restricted entry, it “does not mean that the persons of other religion were called with intentions to convert them”.

That bail hearing took place prior to the revelation that the state’s new Freedom of Religion Act was not actually in force – something that will not happen until 28 August. Police defended their actions, saying they assumed the act was in effect because it received presidential assent on 31 July. It remains unclear how this did not come up in court.



A Christian devotee holds a cross-shaped palm leaf at a religious procession in Hyderabad (AFP/Getty)

Police have said they will drop the charges under the anti-conversion law but that they could still pursue action under other laws, including the Immigration and Foreigners Act 2025.

Regardless, Mr Devnoor's lawyer, Vijaysinh Thombaree, told *The Independent* that his court-ordered bail conditions remain valid, meaning he cannot travel outside the country without the court's permission and has to report to a local police station every Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

The family have set up a GoFundMe page to pay for his legal defence and bring him home to Manchester, and have already raised over £6,600 towards a £10,000 target.

The family said the case had caused Mr Devnoor considerable financial hardship and affected his employment and livelihood, while sustained social media posts and news coverage had caused him "acute mental and emotional stress" and cast him in what they described as a defamatory light.

Mr Devnoor's son Punit, who set up the fundraiser, wrote that his father had previously served a ministry in the Church of England and visited the sick in NHS hospitals. "My father has given much of his life to serving others," he wrote. "He has always been the person our family, and so many others, could lean on."

Ms Devnoor said the family's immediate priority was to ensure her father returned safely to Britain, saying they were increasingly fearful after the details of his identity were made public. "We live in the UK and we read about the treatment of minorities in India, and it's not nice from what we've read," she told *The Independent*, referring to accounts and testimonies she said the family had seen.

"That's our biggest fear at the moment, especially when details of his name, his exact location, where he lives – all of these things that nobody would like in the press – are being revealed. It's very scary.

"Our priority is making sure he comes back home safe. That's the first thing, and then after that, we'll see what needs to be done."

The Independent has approached the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office for comment.

The case is next due in court on 25 August.