

India's religious minorities face harsher anti-conversion laws

Exhumations fuel communal tensions

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EVEN IN THE grave, Chamru Ram Salam found no peace. After a mob gathered to protest against the Christian manner of his burial, the police dug up his corpse and sped off with it. His family's performance of the last rites—caught between tribal custom and the dead man's religious faith—spiralled into a village dispute.

Other such exhumations have been captured in harrowing WhatsApp videos in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh. To stop Christian burials, locals have vandalised prayer halls and torched homes. Police sometimes intervene by removing the offending body. The deceptively welcoming term for the movement behind such clashes is *ghar wapsi*, Hindi for “homecoming”. The idea is that, because the deceased’s ancestors were originally Hindu, conversion to “foreign” religions like Islam or Christianity denies their “real” Indian identity. In Badetevda, the scare tactics have worked: seven Christian families have “come home” to Hinduism.

In March Chhattisgarh passed one of India’s most restrictive anti-conversion laws. As elsewhere, it is dubbed a “freedom-of-religion law”, and *ghar wapsi* is not seen as conversion at all. Maharashtra also passed one last month, bringing to 14 (out of 28) the tally of states with such laws. These new laws, more aggressive than their predecessors, have been passed since 2017 by state governments led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which also rules nationally. They invite government and police intrusion, set harsh penalties and curb marriage rights.

A key measure punishes “allurement” to convert, a term that can be stretched to cover pretty much all forms of proselytising. It is now illegal to promise converts “a better lifestyle”—a ban partly aimed at stopping appeals to the resentment felt by lower-caste Hindus at the discrimination they suffer. Would-be converts must give months of notice and register publicly, with fellow citizens invited to object and thereby prompt a police inquiry, where the convert has to prove they were not coerced. In Chhattisgarh a maximum penalty of life imprisonment and a fine of 2,500,000 rupees (almost \$26,000) await those responsible for “mass or forced conversions”.

Authorities say the laws protect vulnerable communities from pressure and trickery. In Chhattisgarh the danger is, they say, Christianity and the victims are members of tribal minorities. “Conversion is becoming very clandestine and systematic,” claims

Arun Dev Gautam, Chhattisgarh's police chief—so much so that he calls conversions to Christianity the biggest emerging security threat in his state. Mr Gautam worries that Christians are “exploiting the vulnerabilities” of those too innocent to understand what conversion means.

Elsewhere, a common worry is “love jihad”—a conspiracy theory alleging that Muslim men lure Hindu girls into marriage, in order to convert them to Islam, and thus tip India's demographic balance in Muslims' favour. Maharashtra's law, for example, bans “unlawful conversions through marriage”, allows third-party complaints on interfaith marriages, and decrees that the children of interfaith unions must adopt their mother's religion.

Far from protecting the vulnerable, India's anti-conversion laws intrude into their lives. “The BJP wants to subjugate the people—they want to make India a *Hindu rashtra* (nation),” says Kamlesh Dhruv, a young Christian priest from Chhattisgarh. Gazing up in his spartan prayer room you can see the stars. Villagers recently battered holes into its roof with bricks. BJP workers, he says, stood guard.

Anti-conversion laws may soon face legal trouble. India's Supreme Court is considering whether they flout constitutional rights to privacy and freedom of conscience. Its ruling will help shape the role of religion in an increasingly Hindu-nationalist India. For now, however, India's freedom-of-religion laws will continue to make a mockery of the very concept they claim to protect. ■
