

# **Standing Up with the Persecuted Christians in India: Responses of Select Transnational Indian American Christians to the Christian Persecution in India**

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## **Abstract**

Stories of anti-Christian mobs assaulting ministry leaders and worshippers, burning Christian literature, and destroying houses of worship have become a great concern not only for Christians living in India but also for diaspora Indian Christians across the globe. The Indian American Christian community is closely watching, praying, supporting, and advocating for the rights of Christians in India. This article will focus on ways in which Indian American Christians living in the United States are mobilizing in different ways to respond to this crisis. The fieldwork consisted of interviews and participatory observation with members of the Indian American Christian community in the United States.

**Key Words:** Christianity in India, Indian American, prayer, religious persecution

## **Introduction**

This article explores a select group of Indian American Christian responses to violence against Christians in India. The focus of this research emerged from my contextual realities as an Indian American pastor, scholar, and community leader. Among Indian American Christians there is an ongoing conversation about Christian persecution in India. This article contributes to understanding the multifaceted ways in which ministry leaders from various transnational churches located in New York Metro area, Christian organizations, and individuals are playing a significant role in addressing religious persecution. Using various technological platforms and gatherings, Indian American Christians are non-violently engaged in addressing this critical issue.

It was a forwarded video on one of my WhatsApp groups that showed radical Hindu mobs beating Christians. After a few seconds, I had to turn off the video as I was shocked and angry at the way in which these Christians were being treated (El Shaddai Prayer line, NY 2022). Another video was shared with the caption, “These are my church members at Bethlehem Bible Church (name changed for security reasons). They were taken to the police station.... Pastor James (name changed for security reasons) is visiting Deputy Inspector general. Please Pray” (Diaspora Talks 2022). As I watched, my heart sank as I quickly realized I knew those faces. I worshiped with them during my visit in 2022. Not all videos show victimization of Christians. In early 2023, a video was shared showing thousands of Christians, both male and female, young and old, gathering in a nonviolent way in Delhi, the capital of India, to protest violence against religious persecution. They were singing songs and holding banners advocating for a more tolerant India (El Shaddai Prayer Line 2023). In social media platforms such as Facebook, numerous images and videos of stories of nonviolent protest are being shared. These stories from different states and various languages of India share a common theme of harassment, discrimination, anti-conversion laws in many states, destruction of houses and churches, prayer gatherings, and protests. The stories are shared through various technologies and social media platforms, connecting to a global Indian Christian diaspora community.

Christianity in India is an integral part of the religious tapestry in India, tracing back to the first century with the arrival of the Apostle Thomas (Mundadan 1989, 9-115). According to Frykenberg (1999, 148), stories have been passed down orally from generation to generation about the origin and development of the Christian community. Over time, the Christian community took root in Indian soil, integrating India's cultural heritage while preserving its unique identity and practices. According to the PEW research center (Salazar 2021) 2.4% of the Indian population are Christians. Despite Indian Christianity's rich history, violence and religious intolerance against Christians in various regions in India are on the rise.

The diverse Indian American Christian community is deeply concerned about the religious freedom violations in India. This article will focus on ways in which Indian American Christians, living in the United States, are mobilizing in different ways to respond to this crisis. The first section deals with understanding Christian persecutions in India. The intent of this part is to briefly summarize the historical context of violence against Christians in India. Subsequent sections deal with the relationship between Indian American Christians and Christians in India, the role of social media in the dissemination of information, the areas of Christian persecution, and finally Indian American responses to violence against Christians in India.

### **Understanding Christians' Persecution in India**

Even though the Indian constitution under Article 25-28 provides religious freedom to all her citizens the right to profess, practice, and propagate any religion, instances of violence against religious minorities and particularly against Christians are increasing. According to the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations, there were 1,198 cases of violence against Christians in India during 2022 (FIACONA 2023, 7). Open Doors US ranked India eleventh among countries where Christians are persecuted (Open Doors US 2023). Similarly organizations like the United Christian Forum (UCF), a human rights organization based in India, have also documented comparable incidents. According to Ramachandran (2019), Indian Christian women are a double minority (a term that typically refers to an individual or a group of people who belong to two distinct minority identities simultaneously) and are even more prone to discrimination, harassment, and violence. It must be noted that many persecuted Christians are choosing not to file cases against the perpetrators at the police station out of fear of further violence, marginalization, and discrimination. Violence against Christians ranges from denial of fundamental human rights (access to education, employment, and social services), physical attacks, mental abuse and psychological trauma, economic and social marginalization, church vandalism, and destruction of physical church buildings and Christian homes, creating insecurity among Christian communities. According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report of 2023, religious freedom in India continues to deteriorate, and as a result the USCIRF placed India on its list of "Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)" (USCIRF 2023, 24).

Christians' persecution in India arises from a complex web of socio-political origins, religious nationalism, and dominant "forced" conversion narratives (Bauman & Ponniah 2018; Bauman 2016; Melanchthon 2002). Herbert Hoefler, a former Lutheran missionary in India (Hoefler 2001, 9-10), posits that during the independence struggle few Christians in India joined the movement, thereby creating resentment from some Hindus. The emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu national political party, promotes a *Hindutva* ideology that "to be an Indian is to be a Hindu" (Mahendra 2016, 38). According to Mahendra, "Hindutva ideology sees Christianity as a foreign religion, a religion of the colonizers, and Christians have been seen as the agents of

colonization” (Mahendra 2016, 39). Furthermore, the growth of Christianity is creating a demographic shift that is making it more difficult for a “Hindu Nation” to be actualized. It is also generally accepted that many politicians have closed their eyes and are neglecting their responsibility to provide religious freedom. Instead, laws are being passed against anti-conversion laws. The irony is that this law does not apply to those converting to Hinduism. As a matter of fact, the re-conversion *ghar wapsi* “Home Coming” is celebrated publicly (Mahendra 2016, 40).

Despite the growing violence, on the whole Christians in India do not live in fear of persecution. According to one Christian leader (name withheld for security reasons) from a state in South India, “we are ready to give our life.” He goes on to say that “we have identified our sufferings with the sufferings of Christ’s disciples” (Anonymous Ministry Leader 2023). Biblical passages such as “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:10-12), and “Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you” (I Peter 4:12-14), give them strength to endure and to be resilient. Furthermore, the global Indian Christian community is supporting Christians in India by offering hope and assurance.

### **Indian American Christian Community and Transnational Connections to Homeland**

According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report on the “Social Realities of Indian Americans: Results From the 2020 Indian American Attitudes Survey,” there are more than 4 million Indian-origin residents in the United States (Badrinathan et al. 2021). Indian Americans are considered a “model community” because of their economic success and peaceful co-existence with larger communities. It must also be noted that the term “Indian American” is a contested one (George, G. 2022, 438). This article uses “Indian American” in reference to those US residents who trace their ethnic heritage to India.

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2014 found that 18% of the Indian American population are Christians (DeSilver 2014). The majority of Indian American Christians are from the Indian states of Andhra, Kerala, Telangana, and Nagaland. Churches from India that have been planted in the United States include Oriental Orthodox churches (Malankara Orthodox Syrian Church, Jacobite Syrian Orthodox Church, and Malabar Independent Syrian Church), Catholic churches (Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, Roman Catholic Church, and Syro-Malankara Catholic Church), Mar Thoma Syrian Church of Malabar, Church of South India, Church of North India, Pentecostal churches (Indian Pentecostal Church of God, Church of God, Assembly of God, Sharon Fellowship), and various independent churches. While Indian Christians are spread across the United States, the majority of Indian Christians live in California, Florida, Illinois, New York, Oklahoma, and Texas.

While the first wave of Indian Christians who emigrated to the United States were primarily students seeking theological education in the 1940s and 1950s, it was economic push factors that drove many Indians to look outside their country for better economic opportunities (George, G. 2022, 436). The unemployment shortage in the US medical sector in the 1960s offered an opportunity for those in the medical profession to emigrate to the United States on an employment-

based visa with the understanding that, upon their contract expirations, they would return to India. Since then, the high demand in the technology industry has created opportunities for Indians to come to the United States on an H-1B visa, which for many is a pathway to potentially obtaining permanent residency status in the United States. There are also many undocumented Indians that have left India for better economic opportunities or challenging circumstances.

During these immigration waves, Indian Christian women in particular have taken advantage of the opportunity to emigrate to the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Acts of 1965 enabled them to continue their residency in the United States. Accordingly, the role of women in the formation of early “Indian American” Christian worship is undeniable. The US family reunification policy during the 1980s enabled Indian Americans to sponsor immediate family members such as parents, children, and siblings to the United States.

Despite being in the United States, Indian American Christians have a deep connection with Christians in India. They often have relatives and friends living in India. This connection provides a sense of identity and solidarity. As a result, there is a deep interest in knowing and engaging with issues that are facing Christians in India.

### **The Role of Technology and Social Media**

Social media have been playing a crucial role in the dissemination of news about violence against Christians in India. Social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp are powerful tools that ordinary Indian citizens use to share news, bring awareness, and form public opinion. Through text, images, and videos, real-time “citizen journaling” has been bypassing both Indian and US mainline news media that are often reluctant to share such news. This documentation also enables an alternative narrative to the one propagated as the prevailing news by the Indian government. Many Indian American Christians are skeptical that the mainline news media adequately report, and that in fact they ignore, violence against Christians. As Pastor Babu Thomas (2023), a senior pastor in the Indian Pentecostal Church in Queens, NY notes, “We are skeptical about the mainline Indian press. Why are they so silent on this issue?” Social media have thus become a means of finding out what is happening at the grassroots level. Moreover, there is fact-checking to make sure that what is being shared is not misinformation or false narratives. For example, Pastor John Mammen (2023), one of the leaders of *Club House*, an internet Christian ministry, shared that they had invited a person who had personally visited Manipur (in northeast India) during the recent persecution against Christians there to report on events taking place in local communities.

### **Violence against Christians in India Uniting Indian American Young and Older Generations as well as Different Denominations**

Generally speaking, there is a gulf in values between the first and next generations of Indian Americans. As a general observation, the first generation tends to embrace more conservative viewpoints and leans toward the Republican political party. However, the second generation is more progressive and are Democrats or Independents. Not only that, the first generation has a closer relationship to back home than the younger generations. The first generation often talks about life back in India, calling it “the good old days” or the “golden age” of their lives. Foreign affairs, including U.S.-India relations, is thus an important topic for first-generation Indian Americans. However, younger Indian Americans, born and brought up in the United States, have less of a shared connection with issues in India. Their concern is US domestic issues such as violence against Asian Americans and social justice.

Remarkably, young people's passion for social justice and the older generation's concern about their homeland have united them in the fight against religious persecution in India. At Bethel Worship Center (BWC), an Indian Pentecostal church in Yonkers, NY, the older and younger generations are working together on a writing campaign to influence US lawmakers. This is a unique phenomenon, as not all Diaspora Indian Churches in the United States are engaged in this practice. Senior Pastor Johnson Abraham (2023) explains: "Young people are passionate about fighting for justice everywhere. No one knows who's next. Today it could be me and tomorrow it could be you. So, we have to work together." BWC is working with young people in drafting a letter to US Senators. As youth leader Lydia George (2023) has noted, "The first generation are prayer warriors, and we can join with them in bringing our gift of advocacy." As another example, according to Jomy George (2023), the president of a united Indian American young people's organization called the Pentecostal Youth Fellowship of America (PYFA), "We want to create space for this important issue to be addressed. We want the parents to know that the young people are also concerned about this matter" (George, Jomy 2023). A youth leader from the PFYA, Jensen Abraham (2023), remarks, "Count me in. I will be there. We are concerned about all forms of religious violence against minorities in India, especially Christians." As an American of Indian heritage, Abraham is concerned about the growing Christian violence in India. Networking and collaborating with older generations, younger Indian American Christians are standing in unity and in solidarity to fight against religious persecution in India.

Despite lingering suspicions between some Indian American Christian denominations, the violence targeting Christians in India is bringing denominations together for a shared cause. There is a recognition that persecution of Christians goes beyond denominational distinctions. Therefore, despite the diversity of Christian doctrines and practices, there is a common concern. Along with this shared threat, there is also a shared value of love and justice. Members of different denominations are sharing texts, images, and videos that raise awareness and support. Through nonviolent methods, Indian American Christians are finding ways to respond to violence against the Christian community in India.

### **Prayer Services**

Additionally, as a reaction to the violence against Christians in India, Indian American Christians are organizing and coordinating prayer gatherings both in person and virtually, for example through Zoom. It is common as well in weekly prayer services for there to be a time allocated for praying for persecuted Christians in India. These prayer meetings are for "intercessory prayers" that are offered on behalf of someone else. Those in the prayer groups take these meetings and prayers very seriously. As Annamma George (2023), a first-generation Indian American prayer leader, says, "I can't do much, but I can pray." At these meetings, there is a mix of men and women. These prayer times offer spaces for ordinary people to "call out" injustices, knowing that there is a God who will listen to their cry, with a conviction that God is actively involved in the life of his people.

All the prayers are spontaneous. Sometimes songs are sung to encourage the participants to persevere. The prayers offered in silence or shared in a community are not just for safety and protection of Christians, but also for perpetrators as well. Prayers are not for perpetrators to go to jail, but rather for their hearts to be transformed and turn to Christ. The biblical example that is often cited is how Saul, a persecutor of Christians, became a zealous missionary for Christ. The resilience of the persecuted Christians in India is encouraging Indian Americans to continue their

prayer services. Videos and images of persecuted Christians praying, singing songs, and resisting denouncing their Christian faith are often shared through different social media platforms as encouragement that their prayers are being answered. Through their prayers, then, Indian American Christians are both fervently appealing to God and conveying to the persecuted Christians in India that they are not alone in their sufferings.

### **Charitable Initiatives**

Aware of the hardship, loss of livelihood, and trauma that persecuted Christians in India are suffering, many Indian American Christians are reaching out to them with charitable donations. A youth leader at Bethel Worship Center, Shawn Abraham (2023), wants to find out what Indian American Christians can do that can help suffering Indian Christians in their everyday lives: “We have lots of resources, but how do we get it to people in need?” This challenge is compounded by the fact that international financial transactions must be processed through a centralized bank.

Even so, Indian American Christians’ empathy is finding ways to address Indian Christians’ urgent needs for water, food, shelter, and medical care. While there are many NGO’s trying to coordinate various charitable initiatives, the majority of Indian American Christians prefer to give individually to local organizations because of a fear of misuse of funds. During a conversation about sending charitable funds to India, Rojan Sam (2023), an Indian American Pentecostal leader said, “We have to make sure it reaches the people.”

Charitable work is also tricky for Indian American Christians because of the fear of perpetuating the narrative that Christianity is being funded by the West. Moreover, financial improprieties within certain churches and among Christian workers have given rise to allegations of corruption. Abey Abraham (2023), board member of the Bethel Worship Center, explains, “We have to be careful as to how we do the charitable work because we don’t want the current government or different organizations thinking we are making them Christians by offering money.”

### **Advocacy**

On July 25, 2023, with banners “united against hate” and holding US flags, hundreds of Indian Americans gathered together at the parking lot of a church in New Jersey (Abraham, R. 2023). Such gatherings are mushrooming in different Indian American Christian communities. The challenges facing persecuted Christians in India have prompted many Indians living in the United States to engage in advocacy efforts. However, such advocacy efforts take place primarily at the grassroots level, in coordination with other organizations and advocating through social media. Even though many first-generation Indian Americans do not use the word “advocacy,” when asked if disseminating information through different social media platforms is a form of advocacy bringing awareness and mobilizing support, many that I have spoken to said “yes.” Pastor Jacob George (2023) says that one of the reasons why he posts in his WhatsApp group is to “bring awareness and educate people. People shouldn’t be ignorant of these issues that are happening back home.”

However, there are a few organizations such as the Federation of Indian American Christian Organizations of North America (FIACONA) that are intentional about engaging with lawmakers, government agencies, and other organizations to garner broader awareness. Founded in 1999, FIACONA is one of the leading advocacy groups raising awareness, mobilizing support, and

promoting human rights for the Christian communities in India. Along with documenting incidents of violence and disseminating information through reports, FIACONA also engages lawmakers to advocate for policies that will protect human rights. The advocacy is paying off as on June 23, 2023, Rep. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) introduced a resolution (Omar 2023) to “condemn human rights violations and violations of international religious freedom in India... including Christians.” Other organizations, such as the Pentecostal Youth Fellowship of America, are engaged in writing letter campaigns to bring awareness to United States lawmakers and advocate for policies that protect the rights of persecuted Christians. By responding in different ways, Indian American Christians are actively engaged in bringing attention to violence against Christians in India.

## Conclusion

While the Indian Constitution protects the rights of minority communities to practice and propagate their faith, the reality is more complex. The issue of violence against Christians in India has deeply unsettled Indian American Christians, and they have responded in diverse ways to stand up and raise their voices to mobilize support for persecuted Christians in India. They have responded through nonviolent means to raise awareness, pray, start charitable initiatives, and advocate in the hope of ending violence against Christian in India. Furthermore, by collaborating with other Christians, other denominations, policymakers, and other organizations, Indian American Christians have stimulated a collective effort to promote religious freedom in India. They are praying for peace and for transformation in the hearts of persecutors, spreading the word about actual conditions in India, and staying engaged in the hope that their labor is contributing to religious freedom and human dignity.

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