

Madhya Pradesh



Figure 1. Antarashtriya Hindu Parishad (AHP) or The International Hindu Forum, travelled to Itarsi, Amla and Mandideep¹

Madhya Pradesh (MP) is the fifth largest state by population in the country. According to data from World Christian Database (WCD), the total population of MP is just over 84 million people with 86% Hindu population and 2.2% Christian population (nearly two million) and the rest comprising people following other religions including Muslims. Madhya Pradesh has a significant population of Scheduled Tribes at nearly 18 million or 21.1% and a Scheduled Caste population of nearly 13.5 million or 15.62% of the total population. The major Christian populations are in the tribal districts of eastern and western MP with

Jhabua alone having around 35,000 Catholics. Majority of the attacks against Christians in MP is concentrated in the districts of Jhabua and Alirajpur.

Shivraj Singh Chouhan of the right wing Hindu political party, Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) became Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh for the first time in 2005. Since then,

¹ <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/church-defiled-madhya-pradesh-narmadapuram-vandals-wrote-ram-walls>

he has served three consecutive terms as Chief Minister of the state. Previous elections were held in 2018 with the Congress party winning but subsequently 20 Member of Legislative Assembly or MLAs resigned and defected to the BJP and Shivraj Singh Chouhan became the Chief Minister for the fourth time.

Christians have been persecuted in the state as early as 1997, and there have been serious incidents of violence sporadically from that time onwards. The ascent of the BJP has worsened the persecution and Shivraj Singh Chouhan has become particularly aggressive since his fractured victory in the 2018 elections. His government passed the so-called anti-conversion law in 2021 and is now seen as giving vigilante mobs a free hand across the state. Targeting of religious minorities in the state of Madhya Pradesh continues in the same patterns described in the previous report. If anything, they have increased given the political conditions of an election year. Given below is an outline of the drivers of persecution and an analysis of the engines of persecution in the state.

[Hate Speech & Fake News](#)

Hate speech and disinformation on religious minorities is rampant across MP. The targets of such speech are primarily Muslims and Christians. It is perpetrated by right wing Hindutva political and religious leaders from the state connected to the RSS and its affiliates, and/or the BJP. The impact of such speech on the ground is mistrust, fear, hatred and constantly tense relationships between communities. It also provides an ideological framework to create consent for and encourage violence against Christian and minority communities as illustrated in our previous report. This pattern continues in the last few months. In April for example, Baba Ramdev, a spiritual leader and entrepreneur in a public address made the statement that Muslims and Christians were all originally Hindus. He went on to claim that those who follow Hinduism would be supported by the government. In May, a right wing leader from a vigilante group called Antarashtriya Hindu Parishad (AHP) or The International Hindu Forum, travelled to Itarsi, Amla and Mandideep areas in MP spreading hatred against religious minorities in his rallies. He instigated his Hindu audience to build temples on top of mosques, he created fear and panic about the allegedly rising populations of Hindu and Christians and their supposed threat to the Hindu population. It is through such processes of homogenization of the

past and ideas of Indianness that right wing groups build their ideological basis for persecution of minorities.

Conversion

The most common tool to target religious minorities in Madhya Pradesh is the Freedom of Religion Act, 2021. The Act is used to file cases against Christians in the state accusing them of false or illegal religious conversion or attempt to convert. With this Act right wing Hindutva groups such as the RSS and its affiliates have created a tool to enforce a state backed violence against Christians. The last few months follow the trend of cases consistently being filed against Christian pastors, pastors priests and other believers. For example, in February 2023,² “mob of goons created a scene and raised allegations of conversion.” The mob called the police who took the pastor and his wife in for questioning and released them. However, the mob of 40 to 50 men began to protest and put pressure on the police and demanded the couple’s arrest. The couple were detained and a case was put against them. Their application for bail was denied. This model is rampant across the state wherein mobs or individuals with vested interests place conversion cases against Christians as third parties. A similar case took place in Jhabua district wherein a pastor and 2 other believers were arrested based on the complaint of a third party accusing them of converting tribal villagers through allurement. This is in spite of the fact that a Madhya Pradesh High Court Order on June 19th points out that the police should not register cases under the anti-conversion law if they are being filed by a third party.³ Conversion cases are also being used to target minority religious institutions. For example, in June, the Ganga Jamuna school became a center of controversy where they were accused of forcing students of wearing a Hijab. However, an order was issued by the joint director of School Education made no mention of the hijab controversy and said that upon inspection, it was established that several facilities meant for students were inadequate or unavailable. Three days later the school was targeted again. BJP state president accused the school of converting the children based on the premise that 2

² <https://scroll.in/latest/1044743/christian-pastor-his-wife-arrested-for-allegedly-converting-ghaziabad-residents>

³ <https://www.ucanews.com/news/three-indian-christians-get-jail-for-violating-conversion-law/102030> ¹⁰ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/ministers-statements-stoke-damoh-school-conversioncontroversy/article66938567.ece>

of the teachers had converted from Hinduism to Christianity¹⁰. "I noticed that two female teachers who had the surname Khare had become Khans. Our sisters were forced to change their religion because they were under pressure from the school management. The jihadi empire that they have created should be probed," Mr. Sharma said. However, the concerned women pointed out that they had converted before joining the school. Such cases with baseless claims only go to prove that the act of accusing the individuals or organisation of conversion of forcing specific religious practices is actually pure harassment of religious minorities in the state. The pattern with accusations and cases of conversion is clear to see. They are made and registered with little to no proof more often than not resulting in the case ultimately failing to find any guilt or violation. However, the intent is not so much about the case but to disrupt Christian activities and harass the believers through the procedure itself.

Furthermore, it is also about feeding into the wider anti-Christian narrative and mistrust of

Christians in the state especially in tribal areas. Hindi and English media coverage of Christians in the state is focused on these alleged cases of conversion with little to no evidence or detail.⁴⁵ In addition to this, Christian institutions are under constant surveillance by the state. In July, MP police served notices to office-bearers of 40 churches in Madhya Pradesh's Indore city seeking details of religious conversion activities. After protests from Christian community the order was withdrawn. In response, Indore police commissioner Makrand Deuskar told reporters on Saturday that the notices which reached the people were actually sent to the station house officers (SHOs) of all police stations in Indore. The SHOs sent them to members of the Christian community "by mistake."⁶ There is no explanation for why these notices were sent to the respective SHOs in the first place.

⁴ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/man-arrested-for-trying-to-convert-madhya-pradesh-villagers-to-christianity384007>

⁵ <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/general-news/madhya-pradesh-christian-priest-two-others-get-two-years-sentence-for-unlawful-conversion-articleshow.html>

⁶ <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/madhya-pradesh-police-issue-notices-to-church-office-bearers-seeking-religious-conversion-details-withdraw-after-objection-1237462.html>

Ghar Wapsi

The final piece to the puzzle when it comes to the targeting of religious minority groups in the state is the Ghar Wapsi (or return to the Hindu faith). As described in the previous report there is immense pressure being placed on converted Christians from tribal, lower caste and impoverished backgrounds to reconvert to Hinduism. Ironically such re conversions are in fact through force or allurement. Our work on the field showed us that those who were returning to their faith were either socially pressured, or incentivised to publicly give up their faith. These acts of Ghar Wapsi which are enforced by right wing Hindutva groups are key to their method of creating divides in the community and galvanising Hindu pride and anti-Christian and Muslim sentiments. The conversion to Hinduism are not portrayed as private affairs as is the case when there is conversion to Christianity. Instead they are public celebrations focussing on the scale of the reconversion and a celebration of their return. The RSS-linked right wing press is agog with headlines such as: “35 Chamunda-Worshipping Muslim Families Convert Back To Hinduism After Four Generations In Dewas.”⁷ “Ghar Wapsi in Madhya Pradesh: Family that converted to Christianity for money comes back to Hinduism after 9 years.” “Ghar Wapsi in Madhya Pradesh: 50 families reverted back to Sanatan fold in front of Bageshwar Mahant Dhirendra Shashtri”⁸ In visual terms the affair is grand in scale with flowers and commemorations as if to show that the former believers had been saved from the clutches of Christianity.

⁷ <https://swarajyamag.com/states/madhya-pradesh-35-chamunda-worshipping-muslim-families-convert-back-tohinduism-after-four-generations-in-dewas>

⁸ <https://organiser.org/2023/05/01/171786/bharat/ghar-wapsi-in-madhya-pradesh-50-families-reverted-back-to-sanatanfold-in-front-of-bageshwar-mahant-dhirendra-shashtri/>



Ghar Wapsi event conducted by a right wing spiritual leader Dhirendra Shastri in MP

Conclusion

The different forms of violence against religious minorities are designed with a specific purpose in Madhya Pradesh. The 2018 elections in the state saw three-term BJP leader Shivraj Singh Chouhan lose the election to his Congress counter parts. This was an electorally and symbolically significant defeat for the BJP and a grand victory for the Congress given the BJP's dominance within the Hindi speaking north-Indian and central Indian states including MP. Chouhan and the BJP were only able to regain the MP govt through horse-trading and the defection of several Congress leaders mid-way through the term. However, 2023 is an election year in Madhya Pradesh. The elections of 2018 proved that the discourse of good governance and development would not be enough for Chouhan to win the election. To add to that, he faces an anti-incumbency sentiment carrying over and intact since 2018. The BJP and Chouhan's position is vulnerable. Thus, they have turned to the model adopted in Uttar Pradesh (led by the hardline right wing leader of the BJP Yogi Adityanath), of consolidating Hindu votes and splitting the opposition vote through the systematic targeting of minority populations in the state. Thus, one sees an increase in violence against Christians in the state which is allowed to go unchecked by the arms of the local government including the police and legal machinery. Perpetrators of violence continue unchecked with the protection of anti-conversion laws and the knowledge that they will not be pulled up by a government that favours them. As a pastor from the tribal area points out. "It is politically motivated as the ruling pro-Hindu Bharatiya

Janata Party lost most of the seats in tribal-dominated areas in the 2018 state elections. The ruling BJP blamed Christians for the defeat and [the BJP government] has been harassing us by filing false cases of conversion against us. It is their plan to polarize voters ahead of the assembly elections by the year-end.” From hate speech to Ghar Wapsi, these ‘tools’ build communal disharmony that plays on the Hindu insecurities and thus ensures their support.