

Religious tolerance in India 'deteriorating', US lawmakers told

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Washington: Religious tolerance in India is "deteriorating" while religious freedom violations are "increasing", a rights expert has told American lawmakers.

"A pluralistic democracy, in India today religious tolerance is deteriorating and religious freedom violations are increasing," Robert P George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence at the Princeton University and a former chairman of the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, told lawmakers during a Congressional hearing.

"Minority communities, especially Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs, have experienced numerous incidents of intimidation, harassment and violence during the past year, largely at the hands of Hindu nationalist groups," George alleged in his testimony before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organisations of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

"Members of the ruling BJP tacitly supported these groups and used religiously-divisive language to inflame tensions further," he alleged.

These issues, combined with longstanding problems of police bias and judicial inadequacies have created a pervasive climate of impunity in which religious minority communities increasingly feel insecure with no recourse when religiously-motivated crimes occur, George told lawmakers yesterday.

In his testimony, George said in the last year, "higher caste" individuals and local political leaders also prevented Hindus considered part of the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Dalits) from entering religious temples.

The national government or state governments also applied several laws to restrict religious conversion, cow slaughter, and foreign funding of NGOs, he said.

Moreover, an Indian constitutional provision deeming Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains to be Hindus contradicts international standards of freedom of religion or belief, George argued.

India has been on USCIRF's Tier 2 since 2009. Given its negative trajectory, USCIRF will continue to monitor the situation closely during the year ahead to determine if India should be recommended to the State Department for designation as a Country of Particular Concern, George said.

In his testimony, George alleged that civil society in particular non governmental organisations receiving funds from overseas are facing difficulties.

In April 2015, the Ministry of Home Affairs revoked the licenses of nearly 9,000 charitable organisations, he noted.

"For example, two NGOs, the Sabrang Trust and Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP), which run conflict-resolution programmes and fight court cases stemming from the 2002 Gujarat riots, had their registrations revoked," he told lawmakers.

Additionally, the US-based Ford Foundation, which partially funds the Sabrang Trust and CJP, was put on a "watch list" when the Ministry of Home Affairs accused it of "abetting communal disharmony", he said.

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