

Demographic Population

Based on official data from the 2011 Census, India's population includes approximately 201.4 million Dalits (Scheduled Castes) and 104.5 million Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes), representing 16.6% and 8.6% of the total population, respectively. Religious minorities also form a significant portion of the demographic, with Muslims comprising approximately 14.2% (172.2 million) and Christian 2.3% (27.8 million).

Constitutional Guarantees

The constitution of India mandates a secular state and Article 25 guarantees the 'freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion.' It also protects management of religious affairs (Article 26). India is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which guarantees freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) under Article 18.

Intersection with Caste and Scheduled Categories

Paragraph 3 of the constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 discriminates against Dalits, as anyone who professes a religion different from the Buddhist, Hindu, or Sikh religions shall not be deemed to be a member of the Scheduled Caste. Therefore, Dalits who adopt other religions lose their legal status as Scheduled Castes, and eligibility for related socio-economic support.

Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims widely experience double discrimination (often triple discrimination when gender is considered). This stems from the intersection of their caste identity and their religious identity, which both trigger distinct forms of marginalisation.

Impact of Scheduled Class (SC) Status Exclusion

The exclusion of Dalits who convert to Islam or Christianity from SC status significantly affects their economic development by removing access to constitutionally guaranteed reservations in higher education, government employment, political representation, scholarships and targeted welfare schemes. They cannot benefit from specific affirmative action designed to address historic marginalisation. As a result, their access to stable public sector jobs, subsidised education, skill development programmes and entrepreneurship support is reduced, limiting upward mobility and reinforcing income and employment disparities.

This exclusion can contribute to persistent socio-economic vulnerability, as affected communities often remain disadvantaged without the institutional mechanism intended to mitigate structural inequality. They are often relegated to hazardous, low paying and informal sectors such as manual scavenging, tanning and brickmaking, as entrenched caste-based discrimination restricts their access to higher status employment and creates a pool of

vulnerable labour often subjected to bonded labour and modern slavery.

Dalit Christians and Muslims also face external targeting because of their religious beliefs, where they continue to face caste-based social discrimination on a daily basis, while also not being eligible for protections under the Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, which provides specialised legal recourse against caste-based violence and harassment.

Land, Industrialisation and Forced Displacement

For the Adivasi (Indigenous) communities in India, land is central to livelihood, culture, spirituality and communal identity. Traditional forest land and ancestral territories support subsistence farming, forest produce gathering, sacred rituals and social cohesion. Dispossession of these territories affects economic well-being, cultural survival and spiritual life simultaneously.

For Adivasis who are religious minorities or who convert to religions such as Christianity, these vulnerabilities can be compounded. Religious identity may intersect with land disputes that intensify social exclusion and local hostility. Converted Adivasis face additional pressures, including threats of expulsion from their communities for changing or manifesting their religion or belief, while still experiencing the same land dispossession and economic marginalisation.

Father Stan Swamy, a Jesuit priest and a senior advocate for tribal communities in Jharkhand, worked on issues related to land alienation, displacement and implementation of protective laws for Adivasis. His arrest in 2020 under anti-terror laws and subsequent death in custody in 2021 raised concerns about the shrinking civic space for those defending Adivasi land rights and challenging state-backed development projects.

In mineral rich regions such as Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha, where mining, steel production and power projects have expanded, Adivasi communities have faced protected land disputes and allegations of inadequate consent or compensation. In parts of Gujarat and Maharashtra, industrial corridors and infrastructure projects have similarly intersected with tribal land claims.

Displacements have pushed families into informal labour markets and forced migration to urban areas, where they face little social protections resulting in deepening poverty. With civic space for land rights defenders narrowing, community participation in decision-making around development project is further constrained.

Emerging Legal and Social Concerns

The Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA), the Foreign Contribution (Regulations) Amendment Act 2020, state level anti-conversion laws and the proliferation of hate speech targeting religious minorities have had a significant impact on the economic well-being of affected minorities.

Citizenship Amendment Act 2019

The CAA, which fast tracks citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries, determines eligibility for citizenship based on a person's religion. The law violates Article 14 of the Indian constitution which guarantees the right to equality before the law and prohibits discrimination based on religion. On 11 March 2024 the Ministry of Home Affairs announced the Citizenship Amendment Rules 2024 which enable the implementation of the CAA.

Although it does not strip citizenship from existing Indian citizens, the CAA has generated insecurity among Muslim communities regarding legal status and documentation. This atmosphere of legal and civic uncertainty can have measurable economic consequences such as delays and avoidance of formal employment, access to banking and credit systems, investment in education or property, and participation in formal markets. This vulnerability itself has depressed economic confidence and reinforced marginalisation for already disadvantaged Muslim populations across India.

Foreign Contributions (Regulations) Amendment Act (FCRA)

The FCRA amendments have introduced a series of restrictive measures that directly affect economic and developmental stability. The 2020 amendments introduced a 20% cap on administrative expenses (down from 50%), a total prohibition on sub-granting, and a requirement for all organisations to open dedicated accounts at a specific State Bank of India branch in New Delhi. These draconian measures have forced the closure of non-governmental organisations (NGOs), including those involved in public health, environmental protection and poverty alleviation.

By limiting the re-granting relationships, the FCRA has dismantled the network of larger NGOs supporting smaller, grassroots organisations, which has created a vacuum in the delivery of social service that has traditionally complemented government efforts in reaching marginalised communities. The application of the FCRA has been disproportionately experienced by NGOs of a religious nature whose licences were not renewed, including Christian-aligned organisations, many of which provide essential healthcare and education to Dalits and Adivasis.

Hate Speech and Targeted Violence

Hate speech and targeted violence against religious minorities in India have evolved into systemic challenges with profound implications for the country's socio-economic fabric. In July 2024, after holding hearings on India's adherence to the ICCPR, the UN Human Rights Committee

expressed 'concerns about discrimination and violence against minority groups including religious minorities.'¹

Dehumanising language in which minorities are described as 'termites' and 'infiltrators' often translates into calls for economic boycotts and the destruction of minority-owned properties and places of worship. From an economic perspective, when specific communities are targeted for exclusion from local markets or bureaucratised harassment, development guarantees and economic cohesion are undermined.

In 2025 monitoring groups recorded over 1,200 verified hate speech events explicitly targeting Muslims.² For the Christian minority, attacks are often accompanied by inflammatory hate speech that depicts Christians as a demographic threat and as anti-national agents of Western influence, creating a climate where even humanitarian aid and education services provided by Christian organisations are treated as criminal acts. Targeted attacks against Christians had risen by approximately 557% between 2014 and 2024.³

State level anti-conversion laws are currently in place in 12 states in India: Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand. In practice, these laws have created legal uncertainty and increased scrutiny of Christians and Muslims relating to private and public matters, such as personal choice of belief, the administration of institutions, charities, hospitals and education. Higher fines and bail conditions in recent amendments to some laws, in addition to prolonged pre-trial detentions, can lead to immediate loss of household income and accumulation of debt to cover potential legal fees.

Shrinking Space for Civil Society

India has used several statutes such as the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), the sedition law under Section 124A of the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and the Jammu and Kashmir Public Safety Act (PSA) of 1978 to crack down on activists, journalists, students and human rights defenders who have challenged state actions that undermine constitutional guarantees, including those who speak out in defence of religious minorities. The broad and ambiguous provisions allow for prolonged detention without trial, criminalisation of speech and denial of bail, eroding the space for civil society to operate freely. India's civic space remained classified the global civil society alliance CIVICUS as 'repressed',⁴ with authorities frequently using sweeping legal powers to detain activists, journalists and academics without clear charges or timely trials.

1 United Nations Human Rights Committee, Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of India, 2 September 2024 <https://docs.un.org/en/C/2024/10/1/IND/CO/4>

2 Center for the Study of Organized Hate, Report 2025: Hate Speech Events in India, 13 January 2026 <https://www.csohate.org/2026/01/13/hate-speech-events-in-india-2025/>

3 United Christian Forum.

4 CIVICUS, 'India: Civic freedoms remain at risk with crackdown on protests, internet restrictions and denial of bail to activists', 13 January 2026 <https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/india-civic-freedoms-remain-at-risk-with-crackdown-on-protests-internet-restrictions-and-denial-of-bail-to-activists/>

Recommendations

To the government of India:

- Amend the Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order 1950 by removing Paragraph 3 to ensure that Dalit Christians and Dalit Muslims can access the same legal status and socio-economic support.
- Repeal or reform restrictive laws such as the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Act and anti-conversion laws to ensure they comply with international standards.
- Ensure police accountability by launching independent investigations into allegations of extrajudicial killings and custodial torture.
- Extend an invitation to the EU Special Representative for Human Rights to highlight and address the challenges facing religious and ethnic minorities.
- Take decisive legal action against individuals and groups inciting violence or spreading hate speech against religious minorities.
- Protect freedom of expression by lifting all politically motivated charges against activists, journalists and critics held under counterterrorism and national security laws.
- Guarantee the independence of the National Human Rights Commission of India and the Election Commission to prevent political interference.

To the European Union and Member States:

- Mainstream human rights in diplomatic relations with India, starting with an official statement on the human rights situation from the High Representative /Vice-President of the European Commission. If necessary, this could include a reciprocal visit to the EU by an Indian counterpart – the EU should be prepared to concede flaws in its own handling of freedom of religion or belief (FoRB), in order that FoRB issues in India might be raised. The EU should urge India to implement the recommendations listed above in section 'Recommendations to the government of the Republic of India'.
- The Special Envoy for FoRB outside the EU should request an official mission visit to India and highlight the issues facing religion or belief of minorities.
- Under the EU-India Free Trade Agreement, raise human rights concerns are raised in the context of monitoring India's compliance with the Trade and Sustainable Development chapter, and the essential elements clause.

- Human Rights Dialogues with India should be upgraded to headquarters level and include concrete targets, as per the European Parliament's resolution of 29 April 2021. The EU should ensure that FoRB issues and individual cases are mentioned in the subsequent press releases.
- EU diplomatic staff in India should attend court procedures, and seek to visit prisoners who are known victims of human rights violations.

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