

INDIA 2013 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom; however, some laws and policies restricted this freedom. The country is a secular republic, with all religions equal under the law. Some state governments enforced existing “anti-conversion” laws, and some local police and enforcement agencies in certain instances failed to respond effectively to communal violence, including attacks against religious minorities.

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. These included violence between religious groups and organized communal attacks against religious minorities. On September 9, Union Home Minister Sushil Kumar Shinde stated incidents of communal violence had increased from the previous year. The federal government released data on communal riot victims through September 15, reporting 107 people had died and 1,647 were injured in 479 incidents of communal violence. The country’s democratic system, independent legal institutions, civil society, and free press provided mechanisms to help address violations of religious freedom.

During meetings with senior government officials, as well as with state and local officials and religious community leaders, senior U.S. officials raised religious freedom issues, including reports of harassment of minority groups and missionaries, and redress for victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh violence and 2002 communal riots in Gujarat.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 1.2 billion (July 2013 estimate). The country is the birthplace of several religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, and for thousands of years, home to Jewish, Zoroastrian, Muslim, and Christian communities. According to the 2001 census, the latest year for which disaggregated figures have been released, Hindus constitute 80.5 percent of the population, Muslims 13.4 percent, Christians 2.3 percent, and Sikhs 1.9 percent. Groups that together constitute less than 1 percent of the population include Buddhists, Jains, Parsis (Zoroastrians), Jews, and Bahais. “Tribal” groups, which are indigenous groups historically outside the caste system

INDIA

and generally included among Hindus in government statistics, often practice traditional indigenous religious beliefs (animism).

There are large Muslim populations in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala; Muslims constitute the majority in Jammu and Kashmir. Slightly more than 85 percent of Muslims are Sunni; most of the rest are Shia. Christian populations are found across the country but in greater concentrations in the northeast, as well as in the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Goa. Three small northeastern states (Nagaland, Mizoram, and Meghalaya) have large Christian majorities. Sikhs constitute the majority in the state of Punjab.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution and other laws and policies generally protect religious freedom; however, state-level “anti-conversion” legislation and other laws infringe on religious freedom and the rights of minorities.

The law provides “minority community” status for five religious groups: Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, and Buddhists. The law states that the government will protect the existence of these minorities and encourage conditions for the promotion of their individual identities.

There are active “anti-conversion” laws in six of the 28 states: Gujarat, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, and Arunachal Pradesh. Arunachal Pradesh’s anti-conversion law is not implemented due to a continuing lack of enabling legislation. Authorities explain these laws as protective measures meant to shield vulnerable individuals from being induced to change their faith. For example, the Gujarat law proscribes religious conversions through “allurement, force, or fraud.”

Under Himachal Pradesh law, no “person shall convert or attempt to convert, either directly or otherwise, any person from one religion to another by the use of force or by inducement or by any other fraudulent means nor shall any person abet any such conversion.” Violations are punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment and/or a fine of 25,000 rupees (\$407), with increased penalties if “Scheduled Caste” or “Scheduled Tribe” members (socially marginalized groups) or minors

INDIA

are involved. Chhattisgarh maintains similar prohibitions against conversion by force or enticement.

The Special Marriage Act (SMA) grants interreligious couples the right to marry without a religious conversion. There were, however, reports that many couples faced administrative difficulties in doing so and harassment by local officials during the registration process. Couples are required to provide 30 days public notice, and include addresses, photographs, and religious affiliation for public comment. This process opens the interfaith couple up to possible harassment by religious groups objecting to interreligious marriages. In Faridabad, in Haryana, a couple intending to marry under the SMA is required to publish this notice in the local media. Additionally, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, or Jains who marry outside their religions face the possibility of losing their property inheritance rights.

Odisha law prohibits religious conversion “by the use of force or by inducement or by any fraudulent means nor shall any person abet any such conversion.” Penalties include imprisonment, a fine, or both, and are harsher if the offense involves minors, women, or a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe member. The law requires individuals to provide notification prior to conversion and clergy to declare their intent to officiate in a conversion ceremony. The law also requires district magistrates to maintain a list of religious organizations and individuals propagating religious beliefs.

The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) regulates foreign contributions to nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including faith-based NGOs. The Ministry of Home Affairs specifies an application for foreign funding can be rejected under the FCRA if the association is found to be creating communal tensions or disharmony, or if accepting foreign contributions might be prejudicial to “harmony between any religious, social, linguistic, or regional group, caste, or community.”

The Unlawful Activities Prevention Act empowers the government to ban religious organizations that provoke intercommunity friction, are involved in terrorism or sedition, or violate the FCRA. Local authorities on occasion rely upon certain sections of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) to arrest persons engaged in activities deemed offensive to other groups or religions. One provision of the law prohibits “promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion...and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony.” Another provision prohibits “deliberate and malicious acts, intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs.”

INDIA

There are no requirements for registration of religious groups; however, the government requires foreign missionaries of any religious group to obtain a “missionary visa” and usually expels those who perform missionary work without the appropriate visa.

Under Andhra Pradesh law, authorities may prohibit the propagation of one religion near a place of worship or prayer of another religion. Punishment for violations of the act can include imprisonment for up to three years and fines up to 5,000 rupees (\$81).

The constitution provides that Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism are considered subsets of Hinduism; however, these groups view themselves as distinct faiths. Subsequent legislation identifies Buddhism as a separate religion. Jains have minority status in the states of Delhi, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal. State governments have the power to grant minority status to religious groups designated as minorities under the law.

There are different state laws only applicable to certain religious communities (known as “personal laws”) in matters of marriage, divorce, adoption, and inheritance. The government grants a significant amount of autonomy to personal status law boards in crafting these laws. Hindu law, Christian law, Parsi law, and Islamic law are legally recognized and judicially enforceable. None is exempt from national and state level legislative powers or social reform obligations as stated in the constitution.

The law provides Sikhs partial recognition and permits them to register marriages under specific legislation governing such marriages rather than under legislation governing Hindu marriages. There are no divorce provisions for Sikhs, however, and other Sikh matters still fall under Hindu codes.

The government permits private religious schools, but does not permit religious instruction in government schools. The government may prescribe merit-based admission for religious colleges that receive public funding.

The law generally provides remedies for violations of religious freedom, and legal protections exist to address discrimination or persecution by private individuals. Federal bodies including the Ministry for Minority Affairs, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), and the National Commission for Minorities (NCM)

INDIA

may investigate allegations of religious discrimination. There is also a National Commission for Minority Education Institutions that has the power to investigate complaints regarding violations of minority rights in the education system and the right to establish and administer educational institutions. These bodies make recommendations for redress to the relevant local or national government authorities. Although NHRC recommendations do not have the force of law, central and local authorities generally follow them and the two federal bodies have intervened in several high-profile incidents.

Government Practices

The government generally enforced legal protections for religious freedom; however, human rights activists criticized it for failing to respond effectively to some abuses committed by state and local authorities and private citizens. Authorities implemented some restrictive laws and did not always efficiently or effectively prosecute those who attacked religious minorities. There were reports of arrests but no convictions under the “anti-conversion laws.”

There were reports of arrest and harassment of religious minorities. Authorities invoked several sections of the IPC in a manner resulting in restricting these minorities’ freedom of speech on internet sites.

On February 2, the Hyderabad police cybercrime cell requested a social networking site remove a post in response to a complaint made by Muslim groups about a social media page reportedly calling on Hindus to wage war against Muslims.

Court hearings against a member of the Jehovah’s Witnesses for offending religious sentiments continued throughout the year in Vidya Nagara, Shimoga in Karnataka state. Police registered a complaint against the individual following a March 2012 attack by a mob of approximately 20-30 persons on four Jehovah’s Witnesses who were engaged in proselytizing.

Three Hindu youths were free on bail and their case remained pending in a local court in Jammu and Kashmir’s Kishtwar district, after they were charged in late 2012 with desecrating religious symbols and inciting communal hatred. The charges involved uploading a video deemed blasphemous onto a social media site.

Fast-track courts assembled for the purpose of trying the accused in the 2008 violence in Kandhamal, Odisha, between Christians and Hindus after the killing of

INDIA

Vishwa Hindu Parishad leader Laxmanananda Saraswati and four of his aides convicted an additional 13 defendants and acquitted 259 people. A special additional district court sentenced eight people to life in prison for the killing of Saraswati. Of the registered cases, 255 were pending trial and 257 were closed by year's end.

In January NGOs reported that the Odisha police arrested two Christians, Bahadur Murmu and Rama Soreng, under the provisions of the state anti-conversion law in Dubia village of Baripada district after a group of Hindu nationalists accused the two of forcible conversions. Both were released on bail on January 20.

In July Gujarat Police filed charges against Maulvi Yusuf Khan Pathan and Altaf Mirza, who were arrested in 2011 under Gujarat's anti-conversion law, for not seeking government permission to convert a Hindu woman to Islam before her marriage in 2010 to Mirza. Both Pathan and Mirza were out on bail at the end of the year. In 2009, civil rights groups brought a constitutional challenge to the Gujarat anti-conversion laws, but the Gujarat High Court has yet to hear the case.

On October 13, approximately 60,000 Dalits and other lower-caste Hindus converted to Buddhism in a mass ceremony near Junagadh, Gujarat. The Gujarat government ordered an investigation to see if the converts followed the law, which requires government permission to perform conversions. The organizers stated they obtained necessary government permission, but media quoted the District Collector, who needed to approve the conversions, as saying the group had only secured permission to assemble, but not to perform religious conversions.

There were reports of arrests of persons under state-level "anti-conversion" laws. According to NGOs and Christian missionary activists in Odisha, local authorities in some districts invoked a provision of the law to arrest Christian preachers on the grounds they were "forcibly" converting citizens. Information relating to the number of arrests and convictions was not available.

The All India Christian Council reported to the police an instance in June of Hindu extremists in Narasipura, Karnataka burning a Christian church and beating its members. The local police mediated a compromise solution after summoning the two parties; however, the police did not formally register the case.

Clashes in the Muzaffarnagar district in Uttar Pradesh between Hindu and Muslim communities between late August and mid-September led to the deaths of 65 persons, with 68 persons injured and an estimated 40,000-50,000 displaced.

INDIA

Communal violence spread after a Muslim youth was killed by two Hindu youths who accused the boy of sexually harassing a female family member. The local police and the army reportedly allowed unlawful gatherings by individuals carrying arms on September 7, and local administrators reportedly did not respond to counter public calls for violence by politicians and community leaders. At year's end a state government report indicated 4,783 people remained in five camps for displaced persons, while international media reported approximately 15,000 remained in the camps. Uttar Pradesh officials reported 35 children living in the camps had died, but authorities denied media reports that many of them had died of exposure.

In December human rights NGOs and Muslim groups expressed dissatisfaction with local government efforts to close the displaced person camps, noting many of those being forced from the camps feared returning home and had nowhere else to go. As part of its effort to provide compensation to victims of the violence, authorities requested individuals sign affidavits stating they would not return to their villages in return for compensation of 500,000 rupees (\$8,130).

Approximately 950 families (comprising 9,000 people) accepted this arrangement. NGOs, however, challenged the legality and wisdom of the agreement not to return to their previous homes, which they argued would further divide people on the basis of religion, and would effectively force people to abandon ownership of their previous homes.

In an August letter to the prime minister, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu recommended Christians of the Scheduled Castes be added to the Scheduled Caste Act and be treated on par with their Hindu counterparts. An existing presidential order on Scheduled Castes accorded special benefits to Scheduled Caste members who are Hindus by reserving education and employment for them. Scheduled Caste Hindus who converted to Christianity were not eligible. According to Christian and Muslim groups, the order discriminated based on religion by denying similar benefits to Muslims and Christians. The chief minister also requested the Supreme Court address several pending petitions filed by religious minority groups challenging the order.

There was minimal progress during the year in a court case filed by Christian groups in 2004 demanding that Scheduled Caste converts to Christianity and Islam have the same access to reserved government jobs and subsidies as other Scheduled Castes. The Supreme Court heard the case during the year and the Catholic Bishops Conference of India filed court documents. A subsequent hearing is scheduled for March 2014.

INDIA

On August 27, the Gujarat government told the Supreme Court it would prepare a plan for paying for the repair of the 535 mosques and shrines damaged during 2002 riots. This was a result of a ten-year legal battle by the Islamic Relief Committee-Gujarat.

The Gujarat government agreed to implement a 2008 central government minority scholarship program after the Supreme Court declined to stay an order of the Gujarat High Court directing the state government to implement it. The program is meant for Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, and Parsi students. In response to public interest litigation in the Gujarat High Court, the Gujarat government had argued the program was unconstitutional. According to media reports, administrative hurdles still acted as a deterrent to prevent many minorities from securing the scholarships.

The Gujarat government continued to expand the number of Muslim-dominated areas in Ahmedabad, the capital city, designated as “disturbed” under the law. During the year, authorities listed areas such as Gulberg Society and Naroda Patiya, which were some of the neighborhoods worst affected by the 2002 riots, as “disturbed.” A practical effect of the designation was requiring residents in these areas to obtain the district revenue official’s permission before they could sell any immovable property. The requirement was to remain in effect until March 31, 2018. Critics stated that while the law’s original intent was to stop the distressed or forced selling of properties in areas that experienced communal violence, in practice it has led to isolation by limiting the areas where Muslims could buy and sell property.

The Ahmedabad-based NGO Janvikas released a survey of socio-economic infrastructure in 63 areas of Muslim concentration across Gujarat, finding them lacking in access to infrastructure such as road links, banks, the public distribution system, healthcare, water, sanitation, and education. The Janvikas report stated these areas remained negatively affected by the 2002 riots, and that the Gujarat Housing Board-built housing failed to take into account the lack of security that Muslims and Hindus felt since the riots in areas where they were not the majority. The report concluded Muslims and Hindus tended to only reside in areas where they were a majority and where they had separate access to services.

In August the Madhya Pradesh government withdrew a notification requiring chapters of the *Bhagwad Gita*, one of Hinduism’s holy books, to be part of the school curriculum, following widespread opposition. The government had directed

INDIA

the inclusion of the *Gita* chapters in the school syllabus for the 2013-14 academic year.

In September the Madhya Pradesh High Court heard a public interest law suit charging Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Member of the Legislative Assembly Kamal Patel and his son Sandeep with inciting communal violence for political gain during a September 19 incident of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims in Harda, Madhya Pradesh. A Hindu crowd had blocked the Hoshangabad-Khandwa highway with a cow carcass after reports spread of the killing of a cow on a Muslim-owned farm. The crowd then set a number of houses on fire. Thirty houses were damaged and 17 people sustained injuries. The High Court directed police authorities to submit a report on the violence.

The Maharashtra State Minorities Commission began hearing cases on housing discrimination against Muslims following complaints by some residential societies in Mumbai. In one case the police did not take action to investigate a complaint of discrimination in spite of an order from the commission to do so.

According to media reports, in October a Mumbai-based real estate broker posted online advertisements for flats in Mumbai and Thane. The postings also stated, "Muslims not allowed." The advertisement was removed in November after activist Shehzad Poonawalla filed a petition with the National Commission for Minorities seeking action against the real estate agent and website for discrimination. The website issued a formal apology and promised to take measures to avoid such actions in the future. The Maharashtra State Minorities Commission also began an investigation and promised to take action against the property owner as well as the real estate agent.

In September the Supreme Court accepted a petition filed by Rais Ahmad Patel and the Mumbai-based Citizens for Justice and Peace seeking a Criminal Bureau of Investigation probe into the shooting deaths of six Muslims by police. Patel's son Saud Patel was one of the six dead. The shootings occurred in Maharashtra on January 6, following communal clashes. Six policemen were arrested and the Maharashtra government ordered a judicial inquiry.

Government Inaction

Christian groups reported police were slow to register complaints and file charges following physical attacks or harassment. Despite government efforts to foster communal harmony, ineffective investigation and prosecution of perpetrators led

INDIA

to delayed justice, although numerous cases were being pursued in the courts at the end of the year. For example, cases remained pending related to 1984 anti-Sikh violence and 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat. Verdicts in civil cases generally required 15 years and verdicts for criminal cases at times required up to 20 years. Petty cases often never got resolved. There were concerns in civil society over a perceived failure to bring to justice those responsible for communal violence against religious minorities contributing to a climate of impunity.

On July 3, the Gujarat government again extended the term of the Nanavati-Mehta Commission, which the government originally appointed in 2002 to investigate communal violence that resulted in the killing that year of more than 1,200 persons, the majority of whom were Muslim, and the displacement of over 250,000 people. The report was due at the end of the year. Civil society activists continued to express concern about the Gujarat government's failure to arrest those responsible for the violence. Media reports continued to indicate some Muslims still feared repercussions from Hindu neighbors as they waited for the court cases to be resolved. Several victims accused the Special Investigation Team (SIT) appointed by the Supreme Court in March 2008 of pressuring them to dilute their earlier testimony before the commission.

Hundreds of legal cases remained pending from the burning of a train and subsequent violence in Godhra, Gujarat in 2002. Muslims were accused of setting fire to the train, killing 58 people. In the anti-Muslim violence that followed, 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were killed. Zakia Jafri, whose husband was killed in the Gulberg Society Muslim neighborhood during the 2002 violence, has tried since 2006 to register a complaint against 60 state officials for their alleged role in the 2002 violence. After years of investigation, the SIT decided in 2012 not to pursue any charges. In December a magistrate court rejected a protest petition filed by Jafri and upheld the SIT decision. Jafri said she intended to appeal to a higher court.

During the year courts in Gujarat convicted over 150 individuals in cases stemming from the 2002 Gujarat violence. Both prosecutors and defendants appealed the judgments, and the cases remained pending at year's end.

In April a Delhi court ordered further investigation into a case brought by a U.S. citizen who alleged former Congress Party leader Jagdish Tytler instigated 1984 anti-Sikh riots. The court took up the case in 2012.

INDIA

On December 3, the Supreme Court dismissed a petition for acquittal filed by former Congress Party Member of Parliament Sajjan Kumar in a case against him relating to the custodial murder of Surjeet Singh in Sultanpuri, Delhi during the 1984 riots. On December 11, a New Delhi district court set the commencement of the trial for January 2014.

In another case against Sajjan Kumar, Jagdish Kaur, an anti-Sikh riot victim and eyewitness, asked for her case to be heard in Delhi High Court in December. The court had not heard the appeal by year's end. Jagdish Kaur witnessed her husband and her son being murdered by a mob in 1984.

According to the All India Christian Council, Christian preachers and missionaries in Andhra Pradesh were victims of 46 incidents of physical intimidation or other types of harassment through July. Police neither officially registered nor investigated most of these incidents.

A legal challenge by the Jehovah's Witnesses remained pending to a 2000 ruling by the home affairs ministry prohibiting the Jehovah's Witnesses from receiving foreign contributions after finding the group posed a "serious threat to the public peace and tranquility" and their activities would "disturb religious harmony."

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

There were reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice. Since ethnicity and religion were often interrelated, however, it often remained difficult to determine the source of conflict.

Uttar Pradesh, the largest state, experienced the highest number of deaths in communal unrest for the second consecutive year, including the 65 killed in Hindu-Muslim communal violence in Muzaffarnagar.

On November 18, the seven-year old son of a Christian missionary was found dead in a pond with signs of torture in Sadar Thana, Dungarpur, Rajasthan. Harish Gameti, the boy's father, blamed right-wing Hindu activists for his son's death, and said he had received death threats as late as November 10, asking him to stop missionary activities or face consequences. Police registered a First Information Report and were investigating the case as of the end of the year.

INDIA

In September Bangalore police arrested Sajjan Kumar on suspicion of vandalizing a church in Electronic City near Bangalore in 2009. He was also suspected of involvement in a similar church attack in Yedavanahalli, Karnataka in 2008.

On October 26, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, a Hindu nationalist organization) Joint General Secretary Dattatreya Hosabale stated Hindu families should adopt a three-child norm to prevent “demographic imbalance” in society. He also said a “demographic shift” had been taking place due to conversion, declining birth rates, and large scale infiltration from Bangladeshis. He stated that bigger Hindu families would prevent minorities from gaining the upper hand in the country.

A “social boycott” of Muslims in the village of Jillela in Kurnool district followed the shooting of three Hindus by a Muslim over a land dispute in December 2012. The police quickly arrested the accused. Aggrieved Hindu community members distanced themselves from the entire Muslim community in response, choosing not to interact with the Muslim community in any way, including not speaking to Muslims or entering places of businesses owned by Muslims. A local journalist said such boycotts were a regular practice in villages containing different religious groups and government officials did not intervene to negotiate peace between communities. The boycott ended after several months when representatives of both communities in the village came together to resolve their differences.

Conversion of Hindus of lower castes to Christianity occasionally resulted in assaults and/or arrests of Christians. Hindu nationalist organizations alleged Christian missionaries lured low-caste Hindus in impoverished areas with offers of free education and health care, and these organizations equated such actions with forced conversions. Christians stated low-caste Hindus converted of their own free will and said efforts by Hindu groups to “reconvert” these new Christians to Hinduism were accompanied by offers of remuneration and thus fraudulent.

There were instances of intra-Muslim conflict. In January one youth died in a stone-throwing incident between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the old city of Lucknow, followed by violent protests leading to a police deployment to restore calm.

In the Mangalore region in Karnataka, some Muslim groups sought to enforce closures of restaurants and eateries in their neighborhoods during Ramadan. Restaurant and shop owners reported the actions of these Muslim groups had

INDIA

intimidated them into closing during that month whereas they had previously remained open during Ramadan.

On July 31, Sunni Muslims cast stones at the Shia “taboot” procession on the 21st day of Ramadan in the Bazarkhala area of Lucknow. Following the incident, rioters burned over a dozen shops. Police dispersed the clashing groups.

In October police imposed a curfew in Manasa, Madhya Pradesh, after activists from Bajrang Dal, a youth wing of the Hindu nationalist organization Vishwa Hindu Parishad, set fire to kiosks and damaged vehicles in response to reports someone had damaged an idol in a Hindu temple.

In August Madhya Pradesh police imposed a curfew in Chandan Nagar, Indore district, following communal clashes after a cow carcass was found near a temple.

In January members of Hindu Janajagruti Samiti, a Hindu nationalist organization, attacked Christian villagers in Malwan, Maharashtra and similar attacks were reported during the year in Palghar and Sawantwadi in Maharashtra.

The Christian Secular Forum (CSF) reported a number of incidents of violence against Christians throughout the year, including attacks in February and March by members of Hindu nationalist party Shiv Sena against Christian schools in Mumbai and by a Hindu group against an independent pastor and his family in Jhalod, Gujarat for running a house church in May.

In Madhya Pradesh in September, members of Bajrang Dal reportedly forced entry into a meeting organized by the Christian group Mission for the Blind and accused the organizers of forceful conversion. Participants reported they had come to the meeting of their own accord. Police responded and ordered an immediate end to the meeting.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

U.S. embassy and consulate officials raised religious freedom issues with national and local government officials.

U.S. officials met with leaders of all significant religious communities to discuss religious freedom and interfaith issues. In December the embassy created an interagency interfaith working group to promote opportunities to support religious freedom and tolerance. Embassy and consulate officials engaged educational

INDIA

institutions of various affiliations directly and through exchange programs on topics such as religious freedom, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

An embassy officer discussed religious matters with the spokesperson of Sikhdom's holiest shrine, the Golden Temple, and officers also met the spokesperson of the Lotus Temple, a focal point of the Bahai Faith. Representatives from the embassy regularly met with members from the Dalit Christian community to discuss religious discrimination the group faces and religious tolerance issues.

In February the Consulate General in Chennai organized an interfaith roundtable with an American scholar at Satya Nilayam Institute of Philosophy and Culture, a Christian theological research center in Chennai. The consulate general also hosted several interfaith iftars in both Chennai and Thiruvananthapuram. In September the consulate general sponsored an address by a U.S. scholar at an interfaith roundtable at the Institute for Dialogue with Cultures and Religions (IDCR), a research center located within Loyola College, a Jesuit institution in Chennai.

The Consulate General in Hyderabad promoted interfaith understanding at an iftar with a group of Muslim students from three madrassahs in Hyderabad. Consulate general officials made a presentation on Islam in the United States and raised religious freedom issues.

Mumbai consulate staff met with Maharashtra State Minorities Commission officials and discussed the commission's work. Consulate staff also met with numerous members of the Maharashtra Legislative Assembly to discuss religious issues in the forthcoming state and national elections. Staff at the Consulate General in Mumbai travelled to Nagpur, Maharashtra and visited Deekshabhoomi, a pilgrimage site where Dalit leader Babsaheb Ambedkar and thousands of lower-caste Hindus had converted en masse to Buddhism in 1953. The consul general made brief remarks on tolerance.