



Reports

Simran Sidhu

Christianity in Punjab: History and Challenges

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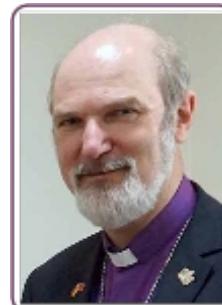
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Christianity in Punjab: History and Challenges

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Simran is fluent in English, Hindi, Punjabi, Persian, Urdu, Turkish, and Gujarati. She comes from a half-Sikh, half-Christian background and has grown up in Punjab, giving her unique insight into the region's religious and cultural dynamics.

Her research interests include history, anthropology, religious studies, cultural studies, and feminism. She has presented two papers at academic conferences during her master's program and continues to focus on the intersections of religion, culture, and social history in Punjab and India.

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Abstract

This report examines the historical development and contemporary presence of Christianity in Punjab. It traces the early arrival of Christianity in India and its institutional establishment in Punjab during the nineteenth century. Drawing on contemporary reports and verified sources, the study documents patterns of population growth, social participation, and institutional development among Christian communities in Punjab. It further analyses recent incidents of violence, discrimination, and social exclusion affecting Christians, including disruptions of worship, attacks on clergy, damage to religious property, and challenges related to legal protection. These developments are examined within the framework of India's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and secularism. The report aims to provide a balanced and evidence-based understanding of the historical roots, demographic changes, and lived realities of Christianity in Punjab today.

Introduction

Christianity has been present in India for nearly two thousand years and forms one of the country's oldest minority religious traditions. India's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, equality before the law, and the right to live with dignity. Within this secular framework, Punjab has historically been known for religious coexistence, pluralism, and shared cultural traditions among Sikhs, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians.

Despite this legacy of coexistence, recent decades have witnessed increasing social tension and episodes of violence affecting Christian communities in Punjab. These developments raise critical questions about the lived experience of secularism, minority rights, and religious freedom in contemporary India. This report examines the historical roots of Christianity in Punjab, the growth and demographic presence of Christians in the state, and the social, legal, and political challenges they face today.

Historical Background of Christianity in Punjab

Christianity has been present in India since the early centuries of the Common Era, with early Christian texts such as the Acts of Thomas attributing its arrival to the apostle Thomas. Over time, Christianity developed through indigenous traditions and later missionary movements, particularly under Portuguese, Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant influence from the sixteenth century onward.¹

¹ Neill, S. (1984). *A history of Christianity in India: The beginnings to AD 1707*. Cambridge University Press.

In Punjab, Christianity emerged as an organized and visible religious presence primarily in the nineteenth century under colonial rule. The first formal Christian mission was established in 1834 at Ludhiana by the American Presbyterian Mission, which founded mission stations, schools, and a printing press that produced Christian literature in Punjabi, Persian, and English. This marked the beginning of systematic Christian institutional development in the region.

The expansion of Christianity in Punjab intensified through Anglican and other Protestant missions. In 1852, the Church Missionary Society established its mission in Amritsar, followed by the creation of Christian settlements such as Clarkabad and Martinpur. Missionaries combined evangelism with education, healthcare, orphan care, and village settlement programs, creating enduring institutions that remain part of Punjab's social landscape. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Christian mission centers were established across Ludhiana, Amritsar, Jalandhar, Lahore, Ambala, Ferozepur, Sialkot, and Hoshiarpur.

Christian population growth in Punjab was particularly notable between 1881 and 1941, rising from approximately 4,000 to nearly 500,000. A significant proportion of converts came from marginalized communities, including Dalits and caste-oppressed groups, who were drawn to Christianity's message of spiritual equality, social dignity, education, and economic opportunity. Punjabi Christians also became active in public and political life, participating in organizations such as the All India Conference of Indian Christians and engaging with broader nationalist debates during the colonial period.²

The Partition of 1947 profoundly reshaped Christian communities in Punjab, dividing populations between India and Pakistan and displacing many families. In post-Partition Indian Punjab, Christians remained a small but rooted minority, concentrated in districts such as Gurdaspur, Jalandhar, Ludhiana, and Amritsar. According to the 2011 Census, Christians constitute approximately 1.26% of Punjab's population.³

In recent decades, Christianity in Punjab has witnessed renewed growth through indigenous leadership, new congregations, and localized forms of worship, particularly after 2020. This contemporary expansion continues a historical trajectory that began with nineteenth-century missionary activity and evolved through colonial, nationalist, and postcolonial transformations.

Despite their long presence and contributions to education, healthcare, and social welfare, Punjabi Christians continue to face social vulnerability and periodic hostility, highlighting the ongoing tension between constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and lived experience in the region.

² Thekkedath, J. (1988). *History of Christianity in India: Volume II — From the middle of the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century*. Church History Association of India.

³ Government of India. (2011). *Census of India 2011*. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

Violence Against Christians in India and Punjab: Contemporary Reports

Violence against Christians in India has occurred periodically across history, but recent decades have seen a documented increase in incidents involving physical attacks, vandalism of religious property, legal harassment, and social exclusion. Despite constitutional protections under Articles 25–28 guaranteeing freedom of religion, many Christian communities experience insecurity in their daily religious practice. Apart from the increase in violent conflicts, ‘digital hate’ for the Christian minority community has also been surfaced on Internet and social media platforms in India and state like Punjab, which makes them suffer not only from physical trauma, but also, mental and emotional trauma for being humiliated in the homeland where they were born and consider it as their ‘home’. The following section presents a chronological account of contemporary incidents, from original reports and sources.

Source – Human Rights Watch, “Anti-Christian Violence on the Rise in India” (30 September 1999)

On 30 September 1999, Human Rights Watch released a chilling report titled “Anti-Christian Violence on the Rise in India.” Between January 1998 and February 1999, at least 116 attacks struck Christians across Gujarat, Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and other states. Churches were burned, pastors beaten, nuns assaulted, schools vandalised, and families threatened for refusing to renounce their faith. How could worship become dangerous in a country that promises freedom of religion?

In Gujarat’s Dangs district (1998), Christmas became a night of terror. Mobs of 100–200 people stormed churches and Christian homes, carrying sticks and iron rods. Jamuna Bhen, a 30-year-old agricultural worker, stood frozen as attackers tore down decorations and threatened to burn her church. “*They said we must become Hindu,*” she recalled. Imagine standing in your place of prayer and being told the only way to live is to give up your faith. What kind of freedom is this? What kind of country asks its citizens to trade belief for safety?

In Keonjhar district (1999), Graham Staines, an Australian missionary, and his sons Philip (10) and Timothy (6) were sleeping in their vehicle after serving leprosy patients when a mob surrounded it, poured petrol, and set it on fire. Doors blocked, they burned to death. What kind of hatred kills children asleep beside their father? What kind of fear turns kindness into a crime?⁴

Human Rights Watch emphasised that these were systematic attacks, often targeting Christian institutions in tribal and Dalit regions, places where conversion was a pursuit of dignity, education, and equality. Is it a crime to seek self-worth? Is it dangerous to believe all humans are equal before God?

⁴ Human Rights Watch. (1999, September 30). Anti-Christian violence on the rise in India. <https://www.hrw.org/news/1999/09/30/anti-christian-violence-rise-india>

Police often arrived too late. Complaints were ignored. Victims were pressured to withdraw cases. Communities rebuilt churches themselves. What does justice mean when victims are left to rebuild alone? What does citizenship mean when protection depends on whom you worship? HRW warned that this silence sent a dangerous message: violence against Christians could happen without consequence.

Source – Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) Research Response IND34243: “India – Punjab, Christians, Hindus, Communal violence & State protection” (30 January 2009)

In January 2009, the Australian Refugee Review Tribunal (RRT) examined whether Christians in India, particularly in Punjab, faced communal violence and whether the state offered protection. The report highlighted a long history of tension, showing that even in a secular democracy with constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion and equality; Christian minorities were repeatedly caught in episodes of hostility.

In Bathinda district, a pastor was arrested on flimsy charges, only to be released on bail days later. Meanwhile, churches were forcibly converted into other religious sites without consequence. Congregants described the emotional toll: families witnessing their spiritual leader detained, fearing for their faith. Vandalism and desecration has been prevalent. Church buildings were destroyed or repurposed, and Christian literature, including Bibles, was seized, torn, or burned. Worshippers reported having to flee services even when police were present. In one village, a congregation was attacked during Sunday worship by a mob of approximately 20 people. Several church members were injured, and hospital care was threatened.

State protection and administrative responses were marked by significant inconsistencies and challenges. FIRs (First Information Reports) were frequently delayed or outright refused, leaving victims without legal recourse and amplifying a sense of injustice. The politicisation of worship further complicated matters, as senior officials sometimes required official permission for religious gatherings, turning what should have been a basic right into a bureaucratic obstacle. Impunity was also prevalent, with pastors and believers facing arrests based on unsubstantiated allegations, while those responsible for harassment or violence often went unpunished, perpetuating a cycle of fear and inequality.

Although focused on Punjab, the RRT acknowledged wider patterns across India:

- Kandhamal (Odisha), 2007–2008: Hundreds of churches destroyed, tens of thousands displaced.
- Ranalai (Odisha), 1999: 147–157 Christian homes destroyed, at least 14 Christians injured.
- Karnataka, 2021: Multiple attacks on churches, worshippers, and Christmas-period violence targeting women and children.

These episodes highlight a historical continuum of anti-Christian hostility in India, combining physical attacks, social ostracism, and administrative neglect.

These incidents and news have utmost importance because even in states with comparatively fewer incidents, Christian communities live under the threat of hostility, social exclusion, and legal harassment. This historical legacy resonates in contemporary India, where civil society monitors recorded 834 incidents of violence and discrimination against Christians in 2024 alone, reflecting a dramatic rise since 2014.⁵

These situations urge us to reflect upon questions like can a secular democracy truly protect religious freedom when believers face social hostility, administrative indifference, and legal threats simultaneously? How do communities reconcile constitutional guarantees with lived experiences of fear and vulnerability? What measures are needed to rebuild trust and safeguard worship spaces against both historical and ongoing threats?

Source – The New York Times, “Arrests, Beatings and Secret Prayers: Inside the Persecution of India’s Christians” (December 2021)

In the winter of 2021, The New York Times carried a haunting report titled “Arrests, Beatings and Secret Prayers: Inside the Persecution of India’s Christians,” chronicling ordinary worshippers caught in extraordinary circumstances: churches stormed, pastors beaten, and prayer driven underground.

On Republic Day, a congregation at Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra in Indore was interrupted by men in saffron, shouting slogans and attacking worshippers. Pastor Manish David recalled, “They kept beating us, pulling out hair,” while children scrambled for cover. When police arrived, they arrested the pastors under anti-conversion laws instead of restraining the mob. How does a community find sanctuary when devotion itself is criminalized?

NYT reporting showed this was not isolated. Evangelical outreach among tribal and lower-caste populations had led to:

- Clandestine night prayers.
- Hidden audio Bibles disguised as radios.
- Raids on farms and prayer halls.

Christian farmer Abhishek Ninama, standing before the charred remains of a church he helped build, asked, “*What is it we do that makes them hate us so much?*” His question echoed the emotional pulse of the report, the human story behind every statistic.⁶

⁵ Ecoi.net. (2011). India: Situation of Christians (Report IND34243). https://www.ecoi.net/en/file/local/1145308/2107_1315385795_ind34243.pdf

⁶ The New York Times. (2021, December 22). Arrests, beatings and secret prayers: Inside the persecution of India’s Christians. <https://nytimes.com/2021/12/22/world/asia/india-christians-attacked.html>

Anti-conversion laws, sometimes carrying penalties of up to ten years, emboldened attackers. Social ostracism and boycotts forced families to skip church, adding layers of fear beyond physical assaults. Worship became not just dangerous but a careful, hidden act. Many Christians, long-established and recent converts, grappled with a painful contradiction: India's Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, yet believers faced harassment, legal restrictions, and recurring violence. It raised deeply human questions like how can one worship freely when prayer must be secret? How does a community reconcile love for its country with fear for its faith? Why believers must sing in secret and pastors fear arrest for leading prayers, what kind of freedom is truly being experienced.

**Source – UK Parliament Commons Library Debate Pack,
“Persecution of Christians and Religious Minorities in India”
(22 February 2022)**

In February 2022, the UK Parliament Commons Library released a briefing documenting persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in India. Even in a secular democracy that guarantees freedom of religion, Christians, roughly 2.3 % of India's population face harassment, threats, and violence. Between 2014–2024, 834 verified incidents targeted pastors, families, and church property. But these numbers are more than data or numbers, these are the lives disrupted.

Imagine a small village church: 50 worshippers gather on a quiet Sunday morning. Suddenly, a mob accuses them of “forced conversion.” Bricks are thrown, windows smashed, hymnals ripped. Mothers clutch children; elders try to calm the panic. For Pastor Ramesh's family, this has been repeated trauma. His children no longer walk freely to Sunday school; every prayer is a gamble. One whispered question from a child captures the fear: *“Mama, will we ever be able to sing together without being afraid?”* 2.3 % of India's population are Christians and 834 incidents over ten years. Victims include pastors, women, children, and entire families uprooted from homes.⁷

These events make us ponder about justice and peace. How can a secular state truly protect religious freedom when communities live under threat? How do legal protections translate into safety when perpetrators act with impunity? How do we measure suffering beyond statistics, through the eyes of children, mothers, and elders who fear worshipping openly? This report is a mirror of human cost: prayers whispered in fear, hymns interrupted by shouting, homes shaken by violence. It is a call to uphold human rights, secularism, and the dignity of every faith, not just on paper, but in everyday life.

⁷ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology. (2022). Persecution of Christians and religious minorities in India (CDP-2022-0042). UK Parliament. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2022-0042/CDP-2022-0042.pdf>

Source – NewsClick/NDTV/The Quint, “Punjab Pastor’s Car Set on Fire, Church Vandalised” (31 August 2022)

In the quiet hours of 31 August 2022, the Christian community in Thakarpur village, Patti (Tarn Taran district), Punjab awoke to a scene that shattered the peace they had long taken for granted. What should have been a normal night became a moment of shock and fear, as masked assailants broke into their church, vandalised sacred symbols, and set the local pastor’s car ablaze, leaving congregants shaken and questioning their safety. Late on 30 August, four masked men entered the Infant Jesus Catholic Church compound under cover of darkness. CCTV footage later showed one attacker, face wrapped in red cloth, repeatedly striking statues of Jesus and Mother Mary with an axe, eventually decapitating the idols and leaving them on the ground.

Inside, a watchman was held at gunpoint with his hands tied, a moment that rippled through the community like a frozen heartbeat. The vandals then set fire to Pastor Thomas Poochalil’s car, a vehicle that had carried him to weddings, funerals, prayer meetings, and school visits for years. Seeing it consumed by flames was like watching a piece of community life burn. When news spread at dawn, villagers gathered, not just in anger but in grief. Roads leading to nearby towns were blocked as believers staged a protest, demanding immediate arrests. One elder, who had served in the church for decades, held a candle beside the charred car, voice trembling: “*We open our doors to everyone. We pray for peace. How did peace become something we must defend with fear?*”

For many families, it was a violation of a sanctuary where children had been baptised, hymns had been sung, and generations had sought comfort. The attack did not occur in isolation. Two days earlier, an FIR had been filed against few people for allegedly disrupting a Christian missionary event in Amritsar. Meanwhile, Giani Harpreet Singh, the Akal Takht Jathedar, criticised missionaries for “forcibly converting Sikhs and Hindus,” and called on authorities to act. Many saw the church attack as emerging from this charged atmosphere of suspicion. Punjab Chief Minister Bhagwant Mann called the incident “unfortunate” and pledged strict action, promising that “no one will be allowed to break the brotherhood of Punjab.” Yet for believers standing outside their damaged church, political assurances could not erase fear. But still, one cannot see any security for Christians in Punjab as one can observe security and social well-being for the majority communities within Punjab.

Stories Behind the Headlines

A young mother described how her children, once eager for Sunday school, now asked if “*bad people break churches at night.*” She whispered, “I have to reassure them God is good, even when this happened.” A school teacher recalled the Sacred Heart Convent School, run by the church for over 30 years, as more than an institution, it was part of the community’s fabric. To see it

targeted left villagers grappling with fear and disbelief.⁸ For a community making up roughly 1.3 % of Punjab's population, the attack struck painfully close to home.

This incident raises human and constitutional questions far beyond one village like what does freedom of religion truly mean when places of worship can be violated so brazenly? How can a secular republic ensure safety and dignity for all faiths, especially when political figures and religious leaders openly debate conversion and identity? Can communal harmony survive when fear replaces fellowship and suspicion overshadows neighborly trust?

These are questions whispered by parents walking past the charred car, and carried by grandparents in the quiet of early morning prayer.

Source – Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW), “Catholic church attacked by suspected extremists” (6 September 2022)

In the early hours of 31 August 2022, before dawn broke over Tarn Taran district, Punjab, a Catholic community awoke to violence shattering the night. Four masked men stormed the Catholic Church of the Child Jesus, vandalising sacred statues and setting fire to the priest's car, according to Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW). CCTV footage showed the attackers binding the church's security guard and holding a gun to his head before striking at symbols of faith.

Father Thomas Poochalil, the parish priest, called police as the echoes of destruction faded. Officers registered an FIR under Sections 295A (outraging religious feelings) and 452 (trespass), offering a glimmer of legal recourse.

Children who had learned hymns, families marking weddings and funerals, elders praying for peace, all felt the intrusion of fear. Families reported sleepless nights, wondering if laughter could ever return to Sunday worship. Just days earlier, on 29 August, few extremists disrupted a Christian missionary event in Amritsar, accusing Christians of conversions and demanding authorities halt prayer meetings.⁹ These incidents were not isolated; they reflected a rising tension in a region historically known for coexistence. In such situations, what does freedom of religion mean when sacred spaces can be violated in the night? How can a community reconcile love for faith with fear that its symbols might be destroyed? Can constitutional guarantees of secularism truly coexist with moments when believers feel unsafe in their own neighborhoods?

⁸ NewsClick. (2024). Punjab: Christian pastor's car set on fire. <https://newsclick.in/punjab-christian-pastor-car-set-fire>

⁹ Christian Solidarity Worldwide. (2022, September 6). Catholic church attacked by suspected Sikh separatists. <https://www.cs.org.uk/2022/09/06/press/5811/article.htm>

Source – USCIRF Spotlight, “Violence Against Tribal Christians in Manipur, India” (22 June 2023)

In the quiet hills and valleys of Manipur, faith once bound communities together, Christian, tribal, and otherwise. But in the spring of 2023, faith became a reason to fear for survival. On 22 June 2023, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) warned that violence was deeply affecting tribal Christians: homes and churches were burned, entire villages emptied, and tens of thousands displaced. In May, clashes between the majority Hindu Meitei community and the mainly Christian tribal Kuki population escalated into attacks on religious sites. Over 250 churches were damaged or destroyed in just weeks. For families like Rohan’s, a young Christian farmer near Churachandpur, May 3 began like any other day, children went to school, elders tended fields, and Sunday services were planned. Then came the first explosions of violence. Smoke, shouts, and burning homes forced families into hurried flight. “*I am afraid to go back,*” Rohan told aid workers, not because there is no home to return to, but because fear lingers in every cracked wall and charred tree.

Reports documented the scale of suffering: Over 70,000 people displaced, many fleeing to jungle camps or army shelters with only what they could carry. Families lost homes, livelihoods, and ancestral lands, trapped between past stability and uncertain survival.

Imagine a grandmother who once prayed in the same pew for decades, now crouched on a cot in a camp, her singing silenced by exhaustion. Imagine children asking where their beloved church went, and parents able to offer only tears. USCIRF noted that India’s minority communities face systemic pressures: discriminatory laws, social hostility, and enforcement practices that disproportionately affect Christians, Muslims, Sikhs, and Adivasis.

The report recommended that India be considered a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) for ongoing religious freedom violations.¹⁰ It is an alarming need to ponder upon questions like how can constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion be upheld when worship itself is dangerous? What happens when communities’ sacred spaces are no longer safe? Is peace real when families live in fear of returning home?

Figures alone cannot convey sorrow. Behind each statistic is a mother who can no longer sing lullabies safely and a father staring at an empty space where his church once stood. Neighbors and friends, once united in meals and festivals, now scattered in camps. This is the human cost of Manipur’s conflict, where ethnicity, religion, politics, and fear collided, and where faith became as frightening as it once was consoling.

¹⁰ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. (2023, June 22). Violence against tribal Christians in Manipur, India. <https://www.uscirf.gov/news-room/uscirf-spotlight/violence-against-tribal-christians-manipur-india>

Source – APCR-India / Unity Christian Forum Fact-Finding Report, “Attack on Christians in Punjab” (November 2023)

In 2022, Punjab, a state long celebrated for religious coexistence, saw a disturbing escalation of attacks on Christian communities. The Association for Protection of Civil Rights (APCR), Unity Christian Forum, and civil society members conducted a field investigation in Tarn Taran and Amritsar, documenting firsthand accounts from pastors, families, and witnesses.

Notable Incidents

28 August 2022 – Daduana, Amritsar: Around 200 believers, mostly women and children, were attending a Sunday prayer led by Pastor Sukhvinder Raja when approximately 500 armed Nihangs stormed the tent. The attackers used sticks, knives, and firearms, injuring 45 people. Despite police presence, no arrests were made immediately. One elderly woman recalled, “We came to pray in peace. Why did they come with weapons?”

31 August 2022 – Infant Jesus Catholic Church, Patti (Tarn Taran): Four masked men entered the church compound at 12:30 AM, held the night-watch security guard at gunpoint, vandalised statues of Jesus and Mary, and set fire to Pastor Thomas Poochalil’s car. Parishioners awoke to destroyed sacred symbols, leaving deep psychological scars.

15 September 2022 – Amritsar: Pastor Sukhdev Mark, a part-time taxi driver and local evangelist, was lured to a secluded street and stabbed by seven unidentified men. He survived but suffered severe physical and emotional trauma.

19 July 2022, Ludhiana (Village Hambra): Pastor Birbal was attacked by villagers forbidding Sunday services; hospitalized after a mob assault.

14 August 2022, Darbar Village, Amritsar: Pastor Balkar Masih’s home prayer was violently disrupted; worshippers fled in fear.

26 August 2022, Tarn Taran: Christians distributing religious tracts were threatened by an unknown man.

30 August 2022, Ludhiana: A prayer service led by Pastor Rakesh was interrupted with accusations of forced conversions.

16 September 2022, Tarn Taran: Pastor Mark Masih was beaten; no FIR had been filed at the time of reporting.

Findings from the APCR Report help us analyse that violence targeted routine religious activities like prayer, tract distribution, and pastoral outreach. Accusations of forced conversions, often unsubstantiated, fuels aggression and police interventions were inconsistent; arrests were delayed or absent, reinforcing community fear.

The heartbreaking impact on human lives includes the families fear for attending Sunday worship. Children asked, “*Will we ever pray without fear?*” Statues and vehicles integral to ministry were destroyed. Pastors faced physical attacks

despite their service and goodwill.¹¹ One needs to reflect upon few questions such as, what does religious freedom protect if worshippers fear violence in their own congregations? Can secular governance ensure safety when law enforcement fails to act? How can communities coexist when public expressions of faith are met with hostility?

Source – Christian Today India, “Wave of persecution mars Christmas for believers in Punjab” (31 December 2024)

As Christmas 2024 approached, Christian Today India reported a series of violent incidents that turned a season of joy into one of fear and disruption across Punjab. In December alone, at least 12 attacks, intimidation cases, and social boycotts targeted believers in villages, prayer halls, and homes. Sukhwinder Singh, returning from a Christmas service, was ambushed and struck on the head simply for playing a dholki during celebration. How does peace coexist with fear when sacred celebrations turn violent?

In Kangarwal & Ludhiana, pastors and congregants faced attacks, bans on prayer meetings, and harassment. Sunday worship and music became triggers for danger. In Firozpur, Pastor Vikas Masih and his family were threatened with weapons. Police dismissed the attack as a “family dispute,” leaving believers feeling unprotected. In Tarn Taran, entire Christian households were socially boycotted, cut off from neighbors and livelihoods. One pastor was imprisoned for alleged possession of religious books, lost his father to a heart attack and his family income upon release, showing how legal harassment multiplies suffering.¹² What kind of society forces families to choose between faith and safety?

These incidents highlight a tension between constitutional promise and lived reality. How can freedom of religion exist when worship itself is risky? How does secularism flourish when legal protections feel inconsistent? And can human dignity survive under social and physical intimidation?

Source – LiCAS.news, “India Sees Sharp Rise in Attacks on Christians, Report Reveals” (14 March 2025)

On 14 March 2025, LiCAS.news published a sobering report: “India Sees Sharp Rise in Attacks on Christians, Report Reveals.” At its heart was the Evangelical Fellowship of India’s Religious Liberty Commission (EFIRLC) report, *Faith at Risk* (2024), documenting 640 incidents of violence and discrimination against Christians in 2024, up from 601 in 2023. Behind each number was a person, a pastor, a caretaker, a child asking, “*Why do they hate us so much?*”

¹¹ Associated Press of Christians India. (2023). Report on Christians in Punjab. <https://apcrindia.in/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Report-on-Christian-in-Punjab.pdf>

¹² Christian Today India. (2024, December 31). Wave of persecution mars Christmas for believers in Punjab. <https://www.christiantoday.co.in/news/wave-of-persecution-mars-christmas-for-believers-in-punjab.html>

2014: fewer than 147 incidents.

2024: 640 verified cases, nearly quadrupling in a decade.

In Bastar, Chhattisgarh, May 4, 2024: Kosa Kawasi, 22, ambushed and killed in broad daylight for refusing to renounce his faith. His wife witnessed it, and five other families fled their villages, leaving behind echoes of worship songs. What does it mean to practice faith when walking home can become a path to death?

In Gaddopur, Uttar Pradesh, October 3, 2024: A small prayer gathering was violently attacked. Worshippers were dragged, beaten, and then detained by police. Prayer stopped being sanctuary; it became anxiety. Can the Constitution ensure religious freedom when the state itself feels like a threat?

In Firozpur, Punjab, Christmas 2024: Eleven attacks during festive preparations forced congregants to flee instead of celebrating. Arms raised in threat, voices silenced in fear. How can joy coexist with fear when faith is criminalized?

In several states, anti-conversion laws were toughened, making accusations non-bailable offences. Pastor Biju Mathew of Meerut was attacked, released, then re-arrested under anti-conversion statutes, not for committing a crime, but for being Christian. When laws meant to protect are used to silence, whose safety is truly defended? The report coincided with intensifying political rhetoric ahead of elections. A letter from 400 Christian leaders lamented the silence of political leaders, noting that hate speech emboldened violence.¹³ Believers cherished constitutional rights like Article 25 but increasingly felt the gap between promise and reality.

Many incidents go unreported due to fear of retaliation. Families hide their faith to protect children, mothers forbidding Christian symbols outside the home. What kind of society requires hiding one's faith to survive? What does secularism mean when threats hide behind laws? Is religious freedom real when worship can be disrupted by force?

The 640 incidents, 60+ imprisoned, multiple murders, and dozens of disrupted prayer meetings are not statistics, they are the stories of men and women whose faith led them to prayer, not persecution, yet whose lives are intertwined with the question of whether India's constitutional promises protect every citizen equally.

Source – The Hindu, “Sharp rise in attacks on Christians in northern India casts a shadow on BJP’s outreach in Kerala” (2025)

In the autumn of 2025, as India approached crucial elections, The Hindu reported a worrying rise in attacks on Christians across northern India, a trend that weighed heavily on how Christians in Kerala perceived political outreach.

¹³ LiCAS.news. (2025, March 14). India sees sharp rise in attacks on Christians, report reveals. <https://www.licas.news/2025/03/14/india-sees-sharp-rise-in-attacks-on-christians-report-reveals/>

The article captured a tension felt in the hearts of many: political promises of inclusivity contrasted sharply with the fear experienced by co-religionists elsewhere.

Kerala, where Christians make up roughly 18–19% of the population, was preparing for local and Assembly polls. Political parties, including the BJP, intensified engagement with Christian communities. Yet, against the backdrop of rising hostility in northern and central India, harassment, destruction of churches, social intimidation, and wrongful arrests under anti-conversion laws, these outreach efforts carried a bitter irony. One school teacher in Kochi described how conversations about faith with children, once joyful, were now tinged with anxiety. Parents whispered warnings: “*Is it safe to be Christian here?*” Even in Kerala, far from the violence, fear had become part of daily life.

While political leaders publicly highlighted meetings with church representatives as signs of inclusion, believers were aware that in other parts of the country, mobs, harassment, and discriminatory enforcement made worship unsafe. The gestures risked feeling hollow when lived experience told a different story. Families tried to maintain traditions with Sunday schools, hymn singing, festivals, but news from elsewhere brought worry to dinner tables. Parents grappled with a painful duality: love for faith, and fear for safety. One mother in Kochi told her daughter, “*I want you to grow up loving your faith, but I also want you to be safe.*” So, what does freedom of religion mean when worship itself carries fear? Can political outreach be authentic when communities live in anxiety? How can constitutional rights reconcile with the daily lived experiences of minorities whose rituals and children’s futures feel under threat?

The Hindu’s narrative aligned with wider evidence: verified incidents of violence against Christians rose steadily over the decade, with states like Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Jharkhand seeing assaults, vandalism, and intimidation. Even distant communities, like those in Kerala, carried the psychological burden of this insecurity¹⁴. Such stories are not only about politics but about parents fearing for their children, worshippers praying cautiously, and communities struggling to find their place in a plural India. It raises a fundamental question: is secularism just a word in the Constitution, or a lived reality for every citizen, regardless of belief?

Expansion of Christian Communities in Punjab

Share of Christians has begun to rise recently. Share of Christians in the population of Punjab was more than that of Muslims in 1961. However, up to 1991, their share had kept slowly declining, while that of Muslims kept rising. By 1991, the Muslims had overtaken the Christians. In the last two decades, the share of

¹⁴ The Hindu. (2025). Sharp rise in attacks on Christians in northern India casts a shadow on BJP’s outreach in Kerala. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/sharp-rise-in-attacks-on-christians-in-northern-india-casts-a-shadow-on-bjps-outreach-in-kerala/article69831343.ece>

Christians has started rising and has now reached the level of 1961. But, it remains considerably below the Muslims.

Thus during the last two decades, there has been a remarkable buoyancy in the growth of both Muslims and Christians. Yet the share of Christian remains fairly low in most districts. It is 2.18 percent in Amritsar, 1.19 percent in Jalandhar and near 1 percent in Hoshiarpur and Firozpur districts; in all other districts, except Gurdaspur, the Christian share is far less than 1 percent. Gurdaspur is, of course, exceptional; Christians form nearly 8 percent of the population there.

Recent estimates indicate a sharp rise in the Christian population across Punjab, especially after 2020, driven by new church growth and large-scale conversions. There is no latest official census report.¹⁵

Reflection

Despite constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, Christians in India, including Punjab, continue to face humiliation, discrimination, and threats for practicing their faith.

In Punjab, a state historically known for Sikhism but also home to Hindus, Muslims, and Christians, the social and legal status of Punjabi Christians remains precarious.

If Article 25 allows citizens to freely practice and propagate religion, why are Christians sometimes punished or targeted for adopting Christianity?

Christianity has been present in India for over two thousand years. Why do some communities remain reluctant or hostile toward it?

How effective are state and government measures in preventing violence against Christians, and why do they sometimes fail?

Why does state protection appear more prompt for some religious communities, while Christians often face delayed or inadequate support?

How do local social pressures, misinformation, and communal narratives impact the ability of Christians to live and worship freely in Punjab?

What role can education, awareness, and interfaith dialogue play in reducing hostility and promoting peaceful coexistence?

How can the state and society ensure the rights, recognition, and dignity of indigenous Punjabi Christian communities who have lived in the region for generations?

¹⁵ Mehta, N. (2025, September 21). The phenomenal rise of Christianity in Punjab. *Nitin-Mehta.co.uk*. <https://nitinmehta.co.uk/?p=3363>

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