



## *Southern Asia*

### **Category 3**

India

Sri Lanka

### **Category 4**

Bangladesh

Pakistan

Myanmar (Burma)

Nepal

### **Category 5**

Afghanistan

Bhutan

Maldives Islands

## Category 3



### India

The population of India is 1,013,661,777, of which 82.4% are Hindus, 12.7% are Muslims, and 2.4% are Christians, including 519,984 Adventist members. India is a democratic, secular republic. Its constitution guarantees religious freedom as a fundamental right. Article 25 of the Indian constitution provides freedom of conscience and the right to profess, practice, and propagate any religion subject to the prescribed limitation of public order, morality, and health. Moreover, the government must not support any one particular religion.

Due to the rise of Hindu fundamentalism, India is facing many difficulties. The present government is dominated by a Hindu religious party. Though the state governments have made public pronouncements in support of secularism, some have nevertheless passed legislation to prevent religious conversions. Additionally, India's six-day work week creates Sabbath problems in public schools and workplaces in most of the areas. In spite of all the difficulties, Adventists are able to carry on evangelistic work in many parts of the country.

The government has decided to form a committee to review the constitution. This has raised questions in the minds of many people. However, the government has given assurances that basic tenets such as democracy, republicanism, and secularism will not be touched. Still, secularists have expressed their apprehension about a hidden agenda in the whole process of constitutional review.

Religious conversions have been prohibited in some areas. The state of Orissa passed an order in November 1999 prohibiting conversions without prior permission from the local police and the district magistrate. This order means that anyone wishing to convert to any other religion must undergo police inquiry to explain his or her reasons. The

police report is then drawn up, supplemented by information from family members and neighbors, and then passed on to the district magistrate who is authorized to grant or deny permission. The law obviously targets Christianity. Little wonder that it has created widespread dismay among India's Christian community. The situation is likely to deteriorate further if, as expected, Orissa brings to power a new legislative assembly controlled by a Hindu-influenced political party.

The establishment of new places of worship have been limited. In the state of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, legislators on January 4, 1999, passed a bill restricting the construction and use of places of worship. The government decided to withdraw the bill due to the concerns raised by many organizations.

The Gujarat State government lifted a ban on its employees being members of the Hindu Nationalist Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sanagh (RSS). Not only Christian organizations, but also secular political parties have objected because such a decision will threaten the neutrality of the state in religious issues. However, India's Prime Minister and Home Minister have both justified Gujarat's actions. The Gujarat Assembly is also expected to discuss its new freedom of religion bill, which would forbid conversion of a person, by fines and imprisonment for up to three years. The bill forbids conversion by "enticement" or "allurement" or by "fraudulent means." There is fear that these vague terms will be interpreted in a manner designed to target Christian evangelistic efforts among the tribal and marginalized people of India, if the bill becomes effective. These developments indicate that Christianity in India is going through difficult times.

It is worth reporting some specific examples of intolerance against Christians. For over three years there has been a low intensity war against Christians in India. Now there has been a wave of terror against Christian missionaries that

extends to the states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, and Andhra Pradesh. This is a new phase in continuing violence against the Christian community in the country, which has created a sense of fear, and in some cases panic, among Christians.

Hindu fundamentalist groups in Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh printed and freely distributed hate literature against Christians, which has provided fuel for the attacks. For example, a booklet published in Gujarat suggests that one way to prevent missionaries from working is to file false cases against them so that they are always tied up in court. False court cases were filed against tribal Christians and Christian institutions in Banswara, a poor district of Rajasthan, to clear the district of Christian presence. Other examples include:

1. November 25, 2001, about 400 sword and knife-wielding extremists forcibly occupied a church in Chindra, Surat District in Gujarat. They destroyed crosses both inside and outside the church, and put Hindu images in the Christian Sanctuary.
2. November 25, 2001, 100 miscreants attacked and stoned a Christian evangelist in Kolar, Karnataka.
3. November 26, 2001, armed miscreants robbed the nuns of St. Mary Convent in Jevalapur in Merut District of UP.
4. Father C. Alphonse, age 64, was brutally attacked by a mob causing serious injuries. He was admitted to the Medical College Hospital in Gwalior, UP.
5. November 29, 2001, miscreants broke into and ransacked a church in Bokaro, Madhya Pradesh.

Twenty-eight thousand incidents of crime, including murders and rape, were committed against members of minority religions in 2001. Despite the violence, there appears to be an upswing in the level of interest in Christianity in India.

During his November 2001 visit to India, the President of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists, Dr. Jan Paulsen, was named State Guest in the states of Delhi, Karnataka, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu. He met a number of government officials, including His Excellency the president of India, Dr. R. K. Narayanan. After the meeting, the government of Kerala issued an order not to schedule examinations on Saturdays.

In addition to violence against Christians, there has been increasing Hindu-Muslim clashes that have resulted in a tragic loss of life. Inter-religious violence has become a national crisis in India, and only concerted effort to reduce tensions, protect religious minorities, and ensure that all faiths are treated with equal dignity is likely to resolve the situation.



### **Sri Lanka**

The population of Sri Lanka is 19,531,000, of which 70% are Buddhists, 15% are Hindus, 8% are Christians, including 3,456 Adventist members, and 7% are Muslims.

Violence between the Tamil population, which is largely Hindu, and the Buddhist population has cost many lives in Sri Lanka in recent years. The conflict has provided a pretext for some abuses against Christians as well. For example, Anthony Alexander, an Adventist pastor, was imprisoned on charges of complicity with terrorism for two years. He was eventually found not guilty of the charges, and was granted refugee status in Canada on January 24, 2002. The IRLA organized a letter writing campaign to support Alexander during his incarceration and the General Conference Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty sent attorney Mitchel Tyner and Richard Fenn to assist the defenders. Even though he was found not guilty of the charges, his life in Sri Lanka may have been in danger and he and his wife left the country in June 2000.

## Category 4



### **Bangladesh**

The population of Bangladesh is 133,504,000, of which 88% are Muslims, 10% are Hindus. There are 23,911 Adventist members in Bangladesh.

Islam is the state religion according to the nation's Constitution. The right to practice the religion of one's choice is generally respected, however, by the government.

Expatriates working for Christian religious entities often come under governmental pressure. The government's Home Affairs Ministry is extremely sensitive about conversions.



### **Myanmar (Burma)**

Myanmar is one of the countries designated by the US Department of State as a "Country of Particular Concern," a designation reserved for particularly severe violators of religious freedom. Violations of religious freedom are numerous. On April 15, 2002 the military junta arrested two prominent Baptist ministers, Rev. That Ci and Rev. Lian Za Dal from Dagon North township, outside Rangoon city.

According to *APD* 17 April, 2002:

Although there is no specific legislation against proselytism, civil, political, social and economical rights are severely restricted. Gatherings of five or more people are illegal unless prior permission from the authorities is obtained. Religious publications are subject to tight state censorship. The Christian community continues to experience extreme difficulties in obtaining permission to construct or repair places of worship. Most old church buildings are dilapidated and in urgent need of repair. Last summer, the regime closed down over 80 churches in and around Rangoon. Most of these churches have not reopened although some have relocated. Prison conditions in Burma are harsh

and prisoners are often denied proper sanitation, adequate medical care, food and water. Trials of prisoners repeatedly fail to meet international standards for fair trial procedures.

### **Nepal**

The population of Nepal is 23.2 million, of which 90% are Hindus, 5% are Buddhists, 2% are Muslims, and 1.7% are Christians, including approximately 1,000 Adventist members. Nepal has declared itself a Hindu Kingdom, but Hinduism has not been established as a state religion. The Seventh-day Adventist Church has a presence in this nation high in the Himalayas, which includes a few churches, a school, and a hospital. ADRA International (Adventist Development and Relief Agency) is very active in Nepal. Restrictions on religious freedom include the categorization of conversion as a serious offense, a ban on evangelism and legal limits surrounding Christian entities owning property. Despite the restrictions, Nepalese Christians can and do worship in Nepal.

### **Pakistan**

The population of Pakistan is 145 million, of which 95% are Muslims, 1.56% are Christians, including 7,239 Adventist members, and 1.5% are Hindus.

The issue of Pakistan's blasphemy laws has recently caused considerable concern. The *Persecution and Prayer Alert* reported this year that:

On May 7, 2002, Aslam Masih, a Christian believer, was given two life sentences as well as a fine of 100,000 rupees by a court in Pakistan. Aslam Masih was arrested under section 295 of Pakistan's blasphemy laws on December 2, 1998, in Mamun Kanjun, Toba Tek Singh. At the time, he was severely beaten by a mob, stabbed in the back and taken to a police station. Appeals have been filed on his behalf.

Pakistan's blasphemy law has been used to convict and jail more than a dozen Christians to this point. While the death penalty has been handed down to several, no one has yet been executed. The law has been severely criticized, in part because it is easily abused by anyone seeking to be vindictive. (*The Persecution and Prayer Alert*, May 15, 2002).

In May 2002, the Lahore High Court confirmed the death sentence against Ayub Masih.

Despite the growing tensions between Muslims and Christians in Pakistan, which have included terrorist attacks against Christian entities, there is cooperation between the faith groups in some areas, including the delivery of health care services. For example, the Adventist Church runs a hospital in Karachi, and one of the Adventist missionaries was recently honored by the government for her contributions. The *Adventist News Network* reported the event:

To celebrate the "International Volunteers Day" in April, Gail Schatzschneider, Karachi Adventist Hospital correspondent, was awarded a shield by the Pakistan Federal Minister for Information and Media Development, Mr. Nisar Memon, who sited the award "in recognition of her long-standing meritorious social services." Mention was made of her work in the promotion of health through a number of community services to the remote rural communities of Sindh, Pakistan. These include: vaccinations of thousands of village children, disaster relief for the victims of storm and floods, tube wells with hand pumps for hundreds of rural villages in Sindh that have been devastated by drought over the past five years in southern Pakistan. (*ANN*, May 8, 2002)

A biography of her work was published along with eleven other recipients who were Pakistani social workers. Schatzschneider is the first Seventh-day Adventist to receive this award in Pakistan. She states, "One advantage of long-term

mission service is that a Christian can build a bridge of trust with Muslim friends as time goes by. As we installed hand pumps in the remote, rural villages several Muslim welfare societies noticed the work of our faithful project manager, Arshad Inayat. They gave us the sacred offering (Zakat) of Ramadan (Islamic month of fasting) to help pay to poor villagers' share for the tube well drilling expenses. We were very honored that they had entrusted this sacred money to our rural work. It is a privilege to partner with our Muslim friends." *(ANN, May 8, 2002)*

On Wednesday January 16, 2002 the government of Pakistan announced the end of the discriminatory system of separate electorate. Under that system 10 seats were reserved for non-Muslims and 227 seats for Muslims. The 3 million Christians could vote only for Christian candidates which were allowed to hold four parliamentary seats. This reform, inspired by General Pervez Musharraf, is a positive breakthrough. Another positive step was taken with the return to the Presbyterian Church (USA) of the Forman Christian college in Lahore in March of 2002. This college was nationalized 35 years ago.

Pakistan still remains a difficult country for religious minorities. On October 28, 2001 in Bahawalpur, 16 Christians were shot and killed, by Muslim extremists, during a religious service. On March 17, 2002, 5 were killed and 45 wounded in the International Protestant Church in Islamabad, the capital.

The blasphemy laws remain a serious impediment to religious freedom. In 1986, while under martial law, section 295(c) was added to the Penal Code. This law established the death penalty or life imprisonment for directly or indirectly defiling the name of the Prophet Mohammed. Derogatory remarks about holy persons are condemned by section 298(c). The blasphemy laws have been used by extremists to persecute non-Muslims and sometimes to take their property.

## Category 5

### **Afghanistan**

The population of Afghanistan is 25 million, of which 85% are Sunni Muslims and 15% are Shi'a Muslims. The Adventist presence in Afghanistan is limited to development and relief work and through medical education assistance provided by Loma Linda University. In Afghanistan, non-Muslim citizens are allowed to have a religion, but are not allowed to express their beliefs in any way. Afghanistan is a nation in transition after the post 9/11 invasion of Afghanistan by US forces, and the subsequent establishment of a new government.

### **Bhutan**

There are approximately 100 Adventists in Bhutan. Religious Freedom does not exist in Bhutan, which is a Hindu Kingdom ruled by a young monarch. There is a general ban on all Christian churches including the Adventist Church. Nevertheless, a few Bhutanese have recently accepted the Seventh-day Adventist faith, but they cannot build a church anywhere in the nation.

### **Maldiv Islands**

There is no religious freedom in the Maldives. All churches are banned. Islam is the dominant religion. Christians from other nations who have entered the Maldives as expatriate workers can only worship in private.