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INDIA - Spotlight on Kerala, Odisha and Chhattisgarh

July 2024 update



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India – Spotlight on Kerala, Odisha and Chhattisgarh



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Kerala

General background

Kerala is located in the south of India on the tropical Malabar coast. The state is divided into 14 districts, the district of Thiruvananthapuram/Trivandrum being its capital. As per World Christian Database (accessed March 2023), the population of Kerala is just over 39 million. Hinduism and Christianity are the majority religions both with more than 14 million adherents (36% of the population) each. Islam comes next with just over 10 million adherents (26% percent of the population). In terms of caste and indigenous identity, there are more three and half million Dalits (Scheduled Castes) making up 9% of the population; and more than 500,000 Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) making up 1% of the population in Kerala.

Christianity in Kerala

There are three main groupings of Christianity in Kerala – Syrian, Latin and New Christians, distinguished by two criteria; the first is the caste to which the original converts belonged, and the second is the date of conversion. Regardless of the debates around the precise period of conversion, it can be said with certainty that Syrian Christianity was flourishing by the sixth century, comprising mainly of elite classes and castes. The arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century and visits by St. Francis Xavier in the 16th century led to conversions from fisher castes that today comprise the Latin Christians, all mostly Roman Catholic. The New Christians came from the wave of missionaries who visited Kerala in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – often led by European Protestants who focused on the lower castes.¹ Of the total number of Christians in Kerala, 70.3% are Syrian Christians, 13.3% are Latin Catholics, 4.5% belong to the Church of South India (CSI - a united Protestant Church), 5.9% belong to other Protestant groups, 4.3% are Pentecostal Christians, and 2.6% are other (mostly Dalit) Christians.²

Political background and 2024 election results

Since the 1980s, the Left Democratic Front (LDF), led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M), and the United Democratic Front (UDF), led by the Indian National Congress (INC) are the prominent coalitions that have dominated the political landscape of Kerala. Socialist and Communist parties through alliances have had a stronghold and affiliation in Kerala society since the 1970s, with the coastal region of Malabar considered to be the heartland of the CPI (M).

¹ See Fuller C J: Kerala Christians and the Caste System, 1976, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2800388>.

² Compiled from various sources. Anderson A and Tang E (eds): Asian and Pentecostal - The charismatic face of Christianity in Asia', 2005; Bergunder M: The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century, 2008; Zachariah K C: Religious Denominations of Kerala (Working Paper), 2016.

Prior to the years of independence, the INC was popular in the state. Although active in Kerala over a number of years, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), has never managed to gain significant popularity. Overall, the state displays strong leftist leanings. Pinarayi Vijayan of CPI (M) has served as Kerala's Chief Minister since 2016 and is the longest serving Chief Minister in the history of both the CPI (M) and of Kerala.

In the 2024 elections, as with earlier elections, the BJP was roundly defeated in Kerala with Congress-led UDF winning 18 out of 20 seats, while the LDF won only one seat in spite of being in power at the state level. The BJP [made history](#)³ by winning one seat for the first time in Kerala, namely the Thrissur constituency (Hindustan Times, 6 June 2024). Moreover the BJP was able to increase its vote share in Kerala from 15.64% in 2019 to 19.23% in 2024. After Modi became Prime Minister for the third consecutive time and formed his coalition government in June 2024, he brought George Kurian, [a Christian BJP leader](#)⁴ from Kerala, into his cabinet (Deccan Herald, 24 June 2024). Kurian did not even contest the election, but he has been assigned the ministries of fisheries, animal husbandry, dairying and minority affairs. This elevation of Kurian to a union ministry is an acknowledgement of the role that the Christian community has played in securing BJP's victory over the Left and Congress parties in the Thrissur constituency as well as increasing BJP's vote share in Kerala. Kurian has been a vocal advocate of the so-called 'love jihad conspiracy theory' as well as defending the BJP when it stands accused of enabling violence against Christians. He has played a crucial role in getting the BJP to engage directly with the church leadership in Kerala.

BJP tactics in Kerala

Kerala, like West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh, has a huge population of minorities that far exceeds the ratio of religious minorities to Hindus in other states of the country. Christians and Muslims together comprise 56% of the population meaning that the old tactic of the BJP, i.e., attempting to polarize the electorate along the lines of Hindus versus religious minorities, would be counter-productive. In Kerala, the BJP has had to resort to a new tactic, namely that of disturbing Muslim-Christian relations and simultaneously constructing a Hindu-Christian voting bloc against the Muslims. In other words, the socio-political task of the BJP has been to woo the Christian community and simultaneously demonize the Muslim community. There are several strategies that the BJP has adopted on both fronts.

The central government offers grants aimed at facilitating and empowering the socio-economic position of religious minorities in a state. These grants are allocated and distributed among religious minorities by minority welfare departments within each state. In January 2020, the Bishop of Kerala's Eastern Rite Syro-Malabar Church alleged⁵ unequal distribution of federal grants and resources among minority communities of Kerala and appealed to the Kerala state government to end them. The Bishops of Kerala maintained that the grants and benefits

³ <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ndas-vote-share-in-kerala-grew-from-13-to-16-68-this-lok-sabha-elections-101717618711520.html>

⁴ <https://www.deccanherald.com/india/kerala/a-surprise-minister-for-many-a-cold-calculation-for-the-sangh-3077000>

⁵ See <https://www.christiantoday.co.in/federal-grants-for-christians.html> for more details. Also see <https://www.ucanews.com/87002>

allocated to the Christian community of Kerala were not in proportion to their size. They alleged that 80% of the aid was going to the Muslim community while the remaining 20% had to be divided among five other minority communities of the state. Father Antony Thalachelloor, Synod Secretary of the Syro-Malabar Media Commission, stated: “Despite representing almost 20% of the population in the state, we are not given federal grants for minorities as per our population ratio”. While it is true that Muslims on the whole receive more aid than is proportional to their population when compared to Christians, it is also true that Muslims are [more economically backward](#)⁶ compared to the Christian population (The News Minute, 29 May 2021).

Syrian Christians and Catholics are mostly dominant caste Hindus who had converted to Christianity in previous centuries, as noted earlier. Both the Syro-Malabar Church and the Catholic Church in Kerala get along well with the BJP, since the latter in Kerala is controlled by dominant castes. In other words, this right-wing alliance between the BJP and a section of Christians in Kerala is undergirded by a nexus of dominant castes coming together across religious identities. The BJP’s Minority Wing in Kerala has been active in spreading rumors about the Muslim community, alleging that young Muslim men are enticing women from Hindu and Christian communities. As a result, it is alleged that the latter’s population strength is decreasing while the Muslim population is increasing.

In January 2020, a synod (a high profile meeting of bishops) of the Syro-Malabar Church was held, [where it stated that ‘love jihad’ was a real threat](#)⁷ and that Christian women were being forced to undergo religious conversion after being allegedly trapped in fake relationships (The News Minute, 1 January 2023). A circular was sent by Cardinal George Alencherry based on the discussions in the synod over ‘love jihad’. Antony Tharekkadavil, a priest from North Kerala well-known on social media for his anti-Muslim talks, has claimed that characters mentioned in the Quran are fictional and that Christian women are the easiest targets for ‘Muslim Jihadis’. These statements have been supported by the Kerala Catholic Youth Movement. Support for such allegations has also come from Kerala Catholics Bishops Council and various right-wing organizations that have sprung up in the last few years, such as Christheeya Viswasa Prathirodikal (Defenders of Christian Belief), Proud Catholics, Apologists Preach Islam, Warriors of Cross, Christian Youths and Christian Association and Alliance for Social Action.

There is a political sub-text to the increasing disinformation spread by a section of elite Christians against Muslims in Kerala. Historically, the Christian community has been a supporter of the UDF that is led by the Congress party. However, the Syrian and Catholic sections of Kerala Christians have come to believe that the Congress-led UDF is increasingly influenced by the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML), an ally and member of the UDF in Kerala, and at the national level, the IUML is also a member of the INDIA alliance. The allegation is that UDF is actually controlled by IUML and that is why the Congress party is leaning towards appeasement of the Muslims.

⁶ <https://www.thenewsminute.com/kerala/kerala-hc-quashes-go-allotting-80-minority-scholarships-muslims-149715>

⁷ ‘Chrisanghis’: The rise of the Christian right in Kerala (thenewsminute.com)

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, a large number of wealthy Syrian Catholic families ventured into the rubber-farming business and some expanded to grow tea and coffee. However, by the 2000s, profits began to fall when India opened up to imports of rubber from Vietnam and the sale price of rubber went down drastically. In 2023, the Archbishop of Thalassery, Mar Joseph Pamplany said that if the BJP could provide a Minimum Support Price (MSP) of Indian Rupees 300 per kilogram of rubber then he would help them get at least one seat from Kerala. The MSP for rubber has not reached 300 rupees but in the 2024 elections, the BJP has indeed managed to get one seat (Thrissur constituency) for the first time in its history.

Conclusion

Given the trends outlined so far, the future for Muslim-Christian relations in Kerala looks grim. It is very likely that the BJP and RSS will intensify its efforts to woo the Christian communities (especially the Syrian and Catholic Christians) and simultaneously sow seeds of suspicion and hatred between Christian and Muslim communities. It should be noted that although there may be a Hindu-Christian alliance against Muslims, the latter are a strong minority with political representation and grassroots organizations on the ground. If the Muslim community is provoked and constantly faces pressure, they are likely to retaliate. This situation is likely to foster conflicts and violence between these two communities. Given the pattern of disinformation and mobilization of ‘radicalized’ Christians, it seems probable that such a conflict could first break out in North Kerala and then soon spread to other parts of Kerala.

Odisha

General background

Odisha is located on the eastern coast of India, bordering West Bengal, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Andhra Pradesh. As per the World Christian Database (accessed March 2023), the population of Odisha is more than 49 million. There are over 8 million Dalits (Scheduled Caste) that form 17% of the population, and more than 11 million Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) that form 23% of the population. There are 62 different recognized Adivasi communities in Odisha alone.⁸ Combined, Dalits and Adivasis make about 40% of the entire population in the state.⁹ As in many other states, those belonging to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) make up more than 50% of the population. Further, the dominant religion in Odisha is Hinduism with 93%, followed by Christians and Muslims at just under 3% each. The real numbers of Christians in Adivasi or Dalit groups are difficult to ascertain since Christianity is often practiced in secret due to either fear of persecution or fear of losing their Scheduled Caste/Tribe status along with the benefits that come with that status. Enumeration of Hindus and other religions is also complex as Adivasis are beginning to mobilize for recognition of their own Adivasi faith to be listed in the official census – separate from Hinduism and Christianity.¹⁰

⁸ <http://www.stscodisha.gov.in/Aboutus.asp?GL=abt&PL=1>

⁹ <http://www.desorissa.nic.in/pdf/odisha-profile-2018.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2020/nov/20/jharkhand-move-triggers-tribal-religion-demand-in-odisha-2225766.html>

Christianity and religious background in Odisha

The history of Christianity in Odisha can also be linked to the early 1800s through the influence of British colonialism. Since then, Christianity has not only grown considerably but also in a diverse manner. Today there are hundreds of thousands of Christians affiliated to Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal churches. Most of these Christians are Adivasis and have converted to Christianity at least in practice if not on paper. Further, there has been a [growing demand](#)¹¹ from many tribes/Adivasi groups to have their own religion (called Sarna) recognized in the official census, i.e., as a religion separate from Hinduism (The New Indian Express, 23 November 2022). The advocates for Sarna are supported by many activists and organizations representing the Munda, Santals, Oraon, Gond and many other Adivasi groups. The advocates of Sarna are against Adivasis adopting Hinduism or Christianity and want to see all Adivasis identifying with nature worship, ancestor worship and animal worship rather than following organized religions such as Hinduism, Christianity or Islam. The Sarna movement thus represents a grave political and cultural threat to the RSS and BJP's Hindutva model. If the Hindutva movement were to lose the support of the Adivasis in states like Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, then the BJP would find it impossible to gain political power.

Political background and 2024 election results

Until the recently concluded 2024 elections in Odisha (both state and general elections are held simultaneously in Odisha), the state was ruled by the Biju Janata Dal (BJD). The BJD claims to be a secular and development-oriented party and has been led by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik since 2000, with Patnaik winning 5 consecutive terms. In his first two terms Patnaik was aligned with the BJP and formed coalition governments. However, after the [large scale anti-Christian violence](#)¹² in 2008 (Scroll, 26 August 2018), the BJD has independently won consistent majorities to form the government. Over the last four or five years, the BJD seemed to be returning to its alignment with right-wing BJP, supporting controversial bills that have rolled back human rights and civil liberties on a diverse range of issues¹³ including supporting the militarization of Kashmir and the criminalization of triple *talaq* (divorce) for Muslims in India.¹⁴ It looked like an undeclared alliance of convenience, with leaders of the BJD facing serious allegations of corruption and the party as a whole facing anti-incumbency issues after many years in power.

In the run-up to the 2024 elections the BJD was keeping its ideological and electoral options open in order to hang on to power in Odisha. However, the BJP completely dominated the Odisha elections at both state and union level. At the union level, out of 21 seats, the BJP won 20 seats while Congress could only win one seat. The BJD did not win a single seat, a drop of 12 seats compared to its performance in 2019 elections. Similarly at the state level, the BJP won 78 out of 147 seats (crossing the majority mark, thus forming the government), while the BJD could only win 51 seats, a drop of 61 seats compared to its performance in 2019 elections.

¹¹ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2022/Nov/23/clinging-to-ancient-faithtribal-communitiesin-odisha-seek-religion-status-2521298.html>

¹² <https://scroll.in/article/891587/they-dont-feel-sorry-revisiting-kandhamal-10-years-after-the-violence-against-christians>

¹³ <https://thewire.in/government/more-ally-than-enemy-bjp-and-bjds-strange-connection-in-odisha>

¹⁴ <https://thewire.in/government/more-ally-than-enemy-bjp-and-bjds-strange-connection-in-odisha>

BJP tactics in Odisha

BJP's major win in Odisha in 2024 will almost without doubt bring an intensification of Hindutva politics and culture. The initial signs are indicating this clearly. Back in 1999, Dara Singh, a member of the RSS-affiliated Bajrang Dal, had murdered Australian Christian missionary Graham Staines and his two sons (both minors) while they were sleeping in a car. Dara Singh was initially sentenced to death but the Odisha High Court later commuted his sentence to life imprisonment. Mohan Charan Majhi, an Adivasi from the Santal tribe, was the chief whip of the BJP when it was in opposition prior to 2024. In 2022, Majhi was [seen at a protest](#)¹⁵ along with other politicians and media persons sympathetic to the BJP, demanding the release of Dara Singh (The Wire, 13 June 2024). On 12 June 2024, Mohan Charan Majhi became BJP's first Chief Minister of Odisha. Crucially, Majhi also retains the Ministries of Finance, Home, General Administration as well as Information and Public Relations.

Majhi's ascent to the top position has been a slow but remarkable journey. He began as a teacher in an RSS school in the district of Keonjhar and subsequently contested and won the local Panchayat (village council) elections in his native village of Raikala. From the village level, Majhi has steadily climbed the political ladder step by step (he has been a three-time Member of Legislative Assembly from Keonjhar) – making his reputation as a diligent politician who consistently [raised his voice against indiscriminate mining](#)¹⁶ and its negative impacts on Adivasis (The New Indian Express, 16 June 2024). However, at the same time, he has been a vocal proponent of Hindutva and a long-time associate of the RSS. The selection of Majhi is a considered and strategic choice for the BJP.

The elevation of Majhi to the post of Chief Minister is a symbolic move and should be understood as the BJP's counter-attack against the Sarna movement. The BJP will project him as a strong Hindu Adivasi leader attempting to 'win back' Adivasis away from Christianity and from the Sarna movement. The implication of this is worrying for Christians in Odisha. It is very likely that Majhi (given that he also controls the Home Ministry and Information Ministry) will crack down on Adivasi Christians and any proselytizing activities. Just two days after Majhi became Chief Minister, on 14 June 2024, unknown persons [hurled a bomb](#)¹⁷ at the Baptist church in Cuttack district (The New Indian Express, 15 June 2024). Some church members had assembled there for a meeting at 10pm when the bomb was thrown, severely damaging the floor of the church. The assailants have not been identified but it is a clear attack on a religious minority institution.

In another incident also on the 14 June 2024, a mob of around 10-15 persons [looted a Roman Catholic church](#)¹⁸ of approximately 12,000 USD (Rs. 10 lakhs) and physically assaulted two priests, Alois Xalxo (aged 72) and Nirial Bilung (aged 52). The mob broke open the main gate at

¹⁵ <https://thewire.in/communalism/new-odisha-cm-had-campaigned-for-release-of-graham-staines-killer-dara-singh>

¹⁶ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/thesundaystandard/2024/Jun/16/mohan-charan-majhi-tribal-cm-who-wears-hindutva-on-his-sleeves>

¹⁷ <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2024/Jun/15/cuttack-miscreants-hurl-bomb-at-baptist-church>

¹⁸ <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/priests-hurt-in-odisha-church-loot-attackers-leave-with-over-rs-10-lakh/cid/2027520>

2:30am, entered the room where the two priests were sleeping, tied them up and hit them with hockey sticks and iron rods when the priests tried to call out for help. The money looted from the church was a combination of church funds and student fees collected from two schools and a hostel. The police stated that this incident was not religiously motivated but was simple robbery (The Telegraph, 17 June 2024). Regardless of whether the mob looted the church and assaulted the priests with the intention of persecuting Christians or purely for financial gain, it should be noted that this incident took place barely 48 hours after the BJP leader Mohan Charan Majhi was sworn in as Chief Minister.

In a further incident on 17 June 2024, a group of Hindus conducted a [violent protest](#) against the sacrificial slaughter of goats on the Muslim festival Bakri Eid in Balasore town of Odisha. The ensuing confrontations with the Muslims who were celebrating their festival led to the destruction of property (including damage to 20 vehicles) and a breakdown of law and order. The Odisha police imposed a curfew from midnight of 17 June onwards, including a shutdown

of Internet and mobile phone connectivity. This [curfew](#)¹⁹ lasted for two weeks, until 2 July 2024 (India.com, 2 July 2024). There were 94 arrests.

Conclusion

Given Majhi's public identity as a strong Hindutva supporter, and as the above-mentioned incidents indicate, there is a strong probability that vigilantes from organizations like Bajrang Dal, Vishwa Hindu Parishad, ABVP and many other RSS-affiliated organizations are now feeling emboldened to increase their attacks against both Muslims and Christians. In other words, the hegemony of the BJP both at the state and central government-level makes minority religious institutions and places of worship in Odisha extremely vulnerable to attacks from radical Hindu vigilantes. To make matters worse, the voters of Odisha have returned a weak opposition at the state level enabling the ruling BJP to take more or less complete control over all state apparatuses without much resistance. For the last 24 years, the BJD ruling over Odisha had meant that there was at least a semblance or illusion of secularism and inclusive development. Now this illusion lies shattered, and the BJP look set to pursue the Hindutva agenda in a more open and aggressive manner.

¹⁹ <https://www.india.com/news/curfew-to-be-lifted-from-odishas-balasore-town-from-tuesday-midnight-7055902/>

Chhattisgarh

General background

Chhattisgarh came into being on 1 November 2000, carved out of India's largest state, Madhya Pradesh. The total population of the state is just under 30 million with about 80% of the population living in rural areas. In terms of religious identity, 93% of the population (nearly 28 million people) are Hindus, while nearly a million people (3%) are Christians and just over half a million (2%) are Muslims. Dalits make up nearly four million (11.4% of the population) and Adivasis just over nine million (32%). The Other Backward Classes (OBCs) are the biggest block at just over 14 million (47% of the population). Chhattisgarh is often referred to as an Adivasi state because it has the highest percentage (32%) of Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the so-called Tribal Belt, which stretches from eastern Gujarat and Rajasthan all the way to the western part of West Bengal.

Political background leading up to the 2023/2024 elections

The BJP came to power early in the newly formed state of Chhattisgarh in 2003 (preceded by three years of Congress rule under the Dalit Christian leader Ajit Jogi) and held on to power for three consecutive terms (2003-2018) under the leadership of Dr Raman Singh (Rajput, an upper caste). A key reason for Raman Singh's hegemony was his party's promise to [provide rice](#)²⁰ at Rs. 1 per kilogram to families identified as living below the poverty line (The Indian Express, 16 January 2023). In the 2018 elections, after three successive terms, for various reasons including anti-incumbency and policies against the interests of the Adivasis (especially pertaining to mining), the Congress party was able to unseat the BJP.

The Congress party formed the government from late 2018 to late 2023 under the leadership of Bhupesh Baghel, a popular OBC leader in Chhattisgarh. Baghel's political strategy for cementing his rule in Chhattisgarh consisted of at least three major elements:

1) First element: A mobilization of OBCs, who make up more than 50% of the Hindu population, was started which included the political decision to increase reservations for OBC groups in Chhattisgarh in government employment and education. After coming to power in 2018, Baghel founded the Quantifiable Data Commission (QDC) in 2019 that came up with the [recommendations to increase reservations for OBCs](#)²¹ (The Week, 15 October 2023). In August 2019, Baghel announced that he would increase reservations for Dalits from 12% to 13%, and for [OBCs from 14% to 27%](#)²² (The Wire, 19 August 2019). Reservations for Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes) remained unchanged at 32%. Bowing to pressure from dominant castes, he also announced a reservation for Economically Weaker Sections (EWS) at 4%. Effectively, this means that [76%](#)²³ of government jobs and public education seats are

²⁰ <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/bjp-raman-singh-chhattisgarh-assembly-polls-bhupesh-baghel-congress-rss-8384103/>

²¹ <https://www.theweek.in/theweek/current/2023/10/07/chhattisgarh-chief-minister-bhupesh-baghel-interview.html?s=08>

²² <https://thewire.in/government/chhattisgarh-bhupesh-baghel-obc-reservations>

²³ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/chhattisgarh-govt-passes-bill-to-raise-reservations-to-76/articleshow/95946849.cms>

reserved for oppressed groups (The Economic Times, 2 December 2022).

By doing the above, Baghel was effectively ignoring the Adivasi communities (concentrated in the southern and northern parts of the state), and instead focused on the OBCs who are concentrated in the central parts of the state. In northern Chhattisgarh district of Surguja, one of the richest Indians in the world, Gautam Adani, continues to operate a coal mine that is formally leased to the State Electricity Board of the state of Rajasthan (also then ruled by the Congress). The Congress governments in Rajasthan (with Chief Minister Ashok Gehlot, an OBC leader) and Chhattisgarh (with Chief Minister Bhupesh Baghel, also an OBC leader) allowed the Adani-operated mine to extract coal and cut down hundreds of thousands of trees in one of the country's largest and most bio-diverse forests called the Hasdeo Arand. Large-scale demonstrations and protests from the Adivasis were ignored by the Congress party and Adivasi resentment now started building up against the Baghel government.

2) Second element: Baghel also promoted a policy of appeasing Hindu voters by promoting various sites in Chhattisgarh as pilgrimage sites for Hindus. Since 2022, radical Hindu vigilante mobs affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have held several public meetings where religious minorities have been denounced and violence has been incited against them. Hindus have been asked to [take up arms](#)²⁴ in preparation for war, and the attendees at these rallies were encouraged to make a pledge – namely, to boycott religious minorities economically and socially (The Scroll, 12 January 2022). From 9-18 December 2022, large-scale violence broke out in the tribal southern belt of Chhattisgarh, especially in the regions of Narayanpur and Kondagaon. The perpetrators were from the RSS and its affiliate organizations (including the BJP), and from the Adivasi-based organizations such as Sarv Adivasi Samaj, Gondwana

Samaj, Janjaati Suraksha Manch (often led by leaders who were backed by the BJP or RSS) who believe that all Adivasis should practice indigenous faiths and renounce Christianity. The target of the violence were Christian Adivasis, who had their churches vandalized, homes destroyed, burials interrupted or denied and were generally displaced from their villages. This kind of direct or physical and structural violence had been building up in these regions through intermittent but frequent incidents of persecution since 2019, soon after the Congress party was elected. By mid-December 2022, more than a [thousand Christians had been displaced](#)²⁵ and sought help from an administration that did little to prevent this violence (Frontline/The Hindu, 12 January 2023). Similar violence continued into early 2023 and continues at a lower intensity even in 2024. It is likely that Baghel did not take any serious action against rising Hindutva in the state with the expectation that former BJP supporters would shift their vote to the Congress party in the elections of 2023.

²⁴ <https://scroll.in/article/1014838/shoot-them-in-congress-ruled-chhattisgarh-hate-speech-against-minority-groups-goes-unchecked>

²⁵ <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/escalating-attacks-against-christian-adivasis-in-chhattisgarh/article66347114.ece#>

3) Third element: Baghel tried to build the narrative of a Chhattisgarhi identity through the inauguration of specific welfare schemes to promote Chhattisgarhi rural life. He declared some festivals as public holidays and staged the 'Chhattisgarh Olympics' where local talent for tribal sports was given a platform and celebrated. The statehood day was accompanied by a tribal dance festival and a competition amongst tribal dancers from various states of the country. His welfare schemes included the purchase of cow dung from rural families (to be used as fertiliser and fuel for biogas or natural gas). He promised funding for collective cow shelters, and schemes for improving irrigation through work on rivers. He also increased and continued the public distribution of rations (mostly rice) that were started by his predecessor from the BJP, Dr Raman Singh, who was chief minister for three terms from 2003-2018. Baghel claimed that Chhattisgarh had always been seen as a den of Maoism and lawlessness, whereas under his regime, the state had now achieved a more positive image, a blend of modernization together with the preservation and promotion of traditional rituals, practice and culture. The aim of this was to take ownership of the popular welfarist legacy left by his BJP predecessor, and prevent accusations of favoritism or of minority appeasement by emphasizing large-scale welfare schemes based on economic criteria. This way, he could promote a brand of sub-regional nationalism in place of the Delhi-centric nationalism that was promoted by the BJP under the aegis of Narendra Modi.

The net result of this three-pronged strategy was that his administration ignored the ongoing violence targeting Adivasi Christians perpetrated by Hindu majoritarian organizations affiliated to the RSS and to Adivasi-led organizations that were indirectly backed by the RSS. In the assembly elections of Chhattisgarh held in November 2023, the Congress party suffered serious losses. Of the 90 State Assembly seats, the BJP won 54, a gain of 39 seats compared to their performance in the 2018 elections, while the Congress party won 35, a drop of 33 seats.

The BJP chose [Vishnu Deo Sai](https://indianexpress.com/about/vishnu-deo-sai/)²⁶, an Adivasi leader as the new Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh (The Indian Express, accessed 11 July 2024). He is one of the most senior Adivasi leaders of the BJP and hails from a political family: Three of his family members were elected representatives in the period 1940-1970. Sai is a politician from the northern district of Chhattisgarh called Surguja and has been active in the region promoting 'Ghar Wapsi' – a Hindutva campaign to 'reconvert' religious minorities from the Adivasi community back to Hinduism through mass reconversion ceremonies. His political career was backed by BJP leader Dilip Singh Judeo who was responsible for starting the Ghar Wapsi campaign on a mass scale in Chhattisgarh in the 1980s (then part of Madhya Pradesh). Sai has also served as a four time Member of Parliament and has previously held the post of BJP chief in Chhattisgarh.

Vishnu Deo Sai's unexpected elevation to the post of chief minister is significant in terms of signalling the intentions of the BJP. Sai represents an Adivasi Hindu identity that holds no tolerance for Adivasis who belong to religious minorities, such as Adivasi Christians. The latter are seen as illegitimate Adivasis who have betrayed their roots and their allegiance to nature worship and the importance to ancestors and local gods.

²⁶ <https://indianexpress.com/about/vishnu-deo-sai/>

The situation has been further exacerbated by the BJP winning handsomely in Chhattisgarh at the level of the general elections held in April and May 2024. Out of 11 seats, the BJP won ten seats, a gain of one seat compared to the 2019 elections and the Congress party only won one seat, a loss of one seat. Thus, the current political situation in Chhattisgarh is characterized by the near total domination of the BJP and its Hindutva politics at the state and national level.

An illustration of this domination occurred when Vishnu Deo Sai made a [public statement](#)²⁷ in January 2024 claiming that missionaries were organizing religious conversion through work in education and healthcare in tribal areas (ETV Bharat, 30 January 2024). He went on to say that only by stopping Christian missionary work in health and education could the Hindutva movement flourish in Chhattisgarh. Barely two weeks later in mid-February 2024, the BJP state government of Chhattisgarh [proposed a bill](#)²⁸ to control and regulate religious conversion (The Print, 23 February 2024). The draft bill empowers the police to verify the ‘real’ intention and purpose behind religious conversion; if conversion is proven to be illegal, the bill proposes imprisonment of up to 10 years. The draft bill states that conversion from one religion to another cannot be done by “the use or practice of abuse, force, undue influence, coercion, inducement or by any fraudulent means or by marriage”. It is notable that the draft bill is silent (i.e., no verification is required nor has any penalty been proposed) on any person who has converted to another religion and subsequently wishes to ‘reconvert’ to their original religion. In other words, the draft bill makes it easier for ‘Ghar Wapsi’ of Christian Adivasis to convert to Hinduism; and penalizes Adivasis who convert from Hinduism to Christianity. It is likely that the bill will not be approved by the higher courts since it places the burden of proof on the accused (to prove that conversion was not illegal), but whether in this or a slightly modified form, it is inevitable that the BJP government will pass a new anti-conversion law for the state in the coming months.

Conclusion

Given this socio-political context, it will not be surprising if violence and the persecution of Adivasi Christians in Chhattisgarh continues unhindered by either police, administration or the political leadership. Vigilantes from groups such as Bajrang Dal (or others affiliated to the RSS) or Adivasi-led indigenous faith-based groups will expect that they can persecute religious minorities with a sense of impunity and indeed even expect some form of protection from the state.

An example of such expectations occurred on 12 June 2024, when a mob of vigilantes affiliated to the RSS and its affiliate organization the Bajrang Dal, [attacked](#)²⁹ Christian families in a village in Jagdalpur district in the southern part of Chhattisgarh (Maktoob Media, 25 June 2024). At least two victims were struck unconscious while three others were hospitalized with severe injuries. One victim had a broken leg. The Hindutva mob then banished these families from the village. Before the banishment, the mob coerced the families into signing a statement that they

²⁷ <https://www.etvbharat.com/en/!state/chhattisgarh-cm-targets-christian-missionaries-over-religious-conversion-sparks-political-furore-enn24013003384>

²⁸ <https://theprint.in/politics/60-day-notice-dm-verification-jail-threat-in-chhattisgarh-conversion-bill-but-not-for-ghar-wapsi/1975167/>

²⁹ <https://maktoobmedia.com/india/chhattisgarh-hindutva-group-attacks-christian-families-forces-to-sign-pact-to-convert-within-ten-days/>

would convert to Hinduism within 10 days if they wanted to return to the village. It should be noted that this coercion took place in the presence of and with the cooperation of local authorities, including the president of the local village council. These Christians have now fled the village, fearing that they will be killed if they return. The mob attacked their homes, demolished farm boundaries and destroyed their crops, resulting in a huge financial loss and blow to their livelihood. Despite ongoing harassment over the last 12 months, the police failed to provide any protection or support for the affected Christian families. Meanwhile, the local administration is firmly in favor of the Hindu vigilantes.

It should come as no surprise if Chhattisgarh continues to see an uptick in persecution of Christians in the coming months and years, especially in southern parts of the state.