

Pastor and Family Arrested for 'Luring' People to Christianity

In a distressing incident that highlights the challenges faced by Christians in Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, a pastor, his wife and their young son have been arrested and jailed on allegations of 'luring' people to Christianity.

The incident occurred in violation of Uttar Pradesh's Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act of 2021. The state, where Christians constitute less than 1% of the population of 200 million, has been enforcing this controversial law to curb conversions.

According to a report from the Union of Catholic Asian News, Pastor Harendra Singh and his wife, Priya, were detained by the police and incarcerated alongside their 3-year-old son on July 31. The authorities accused them of hosting a prayer meeting in their home located in the town of Haidargarh. The pastor staunchly denied the accusations, yet the family faced arrest under the contentious anti-conversion law.

It is heart-wrenching to learn that the young child had to endure jail with his parents, as India's regulations mandate children up to six years old to live with their incarcerated parents, particularly their mothers. This unfortunate practice adds to the already difficult circumstances faced by these innocent families.

India's Constitution promises religious freedom to all its citizens, but some states, including Uttar Pradesh, have chosen to implement anti-conversion laws to safeguard "gullible persons." State legislators argued that the law was essential to prevent religious conversions through

misrepresentation, force, undue influence, coercion or allurement by fraudulent means.

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However, the introduction and enforcement of such laws have faced criticism from human rights groups for potentially violating international human rights standards.

As of February, 12 out of India's 28 states, including Uttar Pradesh, had anti-conversion laws, with others considering implementing similar measures. Each state varies in how they enforce these laws, and Uttar Pradesh stands out for actively prosecuting alleged violators.

According to the Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, "no person shall convert or attempt to convert" another individual. Violators of this law face up to five years in prison and a fine of 15,000 Indian rupees, or approximately \$180.

Furthermore, harsher penalties apply when minors, women or individuals from Scheduled Castes or Tribes are involved in the conversion. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) explains that offenders involved in converting or attempting to convert these groups could face prison terms ranging from two to 10 years, along with substantial fines.

Christian leaders have reported similar instances of persecution in the region. On July 30, 15 Christians, including three pastors, were also arrested and jailed in separate incidents. Pastor Amarjeet Ram and five others from Balapur village in Ghazipur district faced arrest for hosting a prayer meeting, and their pleas for freedom have been rejected.

In these challenging times for Christians in Uttar Pradesh, and across India, we find solace in the words of the Bible. The Scriptures remind us of the trials faced by early Christians and the persecution they endured for their faith.

In the Gospel of Matthew 5:10-12, Jesus Himself encourages believers, saying, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be very glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in this manner they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

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