

Major Christian Leaders Worried New Bill Could Be the End of Faith as They Know It

Church leaders in India have joined the chorus of protest against the BJP-led government, known for espousing a Hindu nationalist agenda, hurrying through an “anti-conversion law” in the eastern state of Jharkhand.

The Freedom of Religion Bill, which was introduced and passed on the same day (Aug. 12) in the Jharkhand Assembly, seems harmless in name but in reality prevents people from having the freedom to choose to change their religion.

Under the new law, offenders—those deemed to have “forced” another person to change their religion—could face three years’ imprisonment and fines of 50,000 rupees (U.S. \$800) or four years’ imprisonment and a 100,000-rupee fine if the person converted is a minor, a woman or a member of the less educated classes, such as Dalits.

“This is their style. They don’t want any debate. They just do what they want,” Cardinal Telesphore Toppo, the Archbishop of Ranchi (Jharkhand’s capital), told World Watch Monitor.

“I don’t think it is the desire of one man [the Chief Minister]. There is an ideology behind it. Wherever they [the BJP] are in power, they are doing it.

“They are accusing us of illegal conversions of tribals and Dalits. But can they point out one such conversion?”

Cardinal Toppo, himself a tribal, heads the Catholic Church in Jharkhand, where Christians account for less than five percent of the state’s 32 million people.

Jharkhand is the fifth BJP-ruled state since 2002 to pass an

“anti-conversion law” –after Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. However, in western Rajasthan state, the bill passed by the State Assembly in 2011 has not yet become an act, as it has not received federal presidential approval. (In India, bills passed by State Assemblies become “acts” only after receiving the president’s assent.)

During the hurried discussion on the bill in the Jharkhand Assembly on Aug. 12, Stephen Marandi, senior legislator of the opposition Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), challenged the need for such a legislation, summing up the concern of the Christians, Muslims and secular parties over legislation that could be misused against minorities, as has been the case in other states.

“The Constitution gives freedom to practice and profess one’s religion. There are already penal provisions ... for those indulging in coercive conversion or using allurement. So what is the need for a separate bill?” Marandi asked, demanding that the bill to be referred to a select committee.

However, the ruling BJP-led government instead put the bill to vote, which was quickly passed as the BJP enjoys a clear majority in Jharkhand’s state legislature.

Shibu Thomas, founder and director of the charity Persecution Relief, told World Watch Monitor that the “hurry” with which the Hindu nationalists passed the legislation proves that “they do not care for minorities.”

“The agenda behind the legislation is to polarize people on religious lines and consolidate the [majority] Hindu voters. They want to fool the Hindus to believe that their religion is under threat due to conversions,” said Thomas, whose organization has set up an online petition to campaign against “anti-conversion laws” in India.

Thomas added that one former member of the Indian Parliament, Bahadur Oraon, who is also a tribal, said he is willing to

convert to Christianity if only to protest against the legislation.

Thomas also criticized what he called the BJP's "shocking misuse" of the name of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Two days before the bill was introduced in the Assembly, the Jharkhand government took out a controversial front-page advertisement in some of the major newspapers, in the name of the BJP chief minister Raghubar Das, with a purported quote from Gandhi insinuating that missionaries were engaging in fraudulent conversions by doling out rice ("goodies") to the "gullible" poor.

"Many are even questioning the source of this quote, attributed to Mahatma Gandhi," said Thomas.

The *Scroll* website—one of the leading Indian news portals—in its post on Aug. 16 described Jharkhand's anti-conversion bill as a "body blow to freedom of religion in India".

"The Bharatiya Janata Party's attempts at policing religious belief will push the country into a dark age," cautioned the article.

Thomas also accused India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, of engaging in "mere rhetoric" when he called on Indians on Independence Day (Aug. 15) to "shun violence in the name of faith," saying it was "harmful for the social fabric."

Declaring that India is "the land of Gandhi and Buddha, we have to move forward, taking everyone along," Modi said. "We have to successfully carry it forward and that is why in the name of faith, violence cannot be allowed. The poison of communalism can never benefit the country."

But Thomas said: "While Modi's intentions may be sincere, he is just a pawn and a small entity in the larger scope of things ... He has used the same hyperbole in earlier addresses. However, India and the world over are beginning to see that

his talk does not match his walk.

“Every time an incident takes place, instead of his stoic silence, he needs to react and respond and vehemently condemn all atrocities and attacks against minorities in the name of religion. Then people will take him seriously.”

Simultaneously, the National Council of Churches in India in an “open letter” to the prime minister on Independence Day expressed its anguish that “we keep on hearing statements which stereotype Christians as being aliens or as being people whose patriotism is questioned”. {eoa}

This article originally appeared on World Watch Monitor.