



Regional Profile

SOUTH ASIA: A MICROCOSM OF WORLD PERSECUTION

"We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed." 2 Corinthians 4:8-9

Five powerful ideologies hold sway over the various nations of South Asia and severely oppress local Christians. Indeed, most of the different forms and sources of persecution that beset God's people throughout the world can be found in this region. The poverty endemic to the region and the proneness of many areas to political turmoil or natural disasters make our brothers and sisters still more vulnerable. Yet in some countries the churches are growing and flourishing, or maintaining a bold witness in the face of persecution.

In this Regional Profile we will examine the acute challenges faced by Christians in South Asia, as a way of surveying the main religions and philosophies that cause so much suffering and distress to our Christian family all around the world.

AN UNSTABLE REGION

South Asia covers a huge area of some two million square miles. It is home to more than 1.6 billion people, and among these, Christians probably number only about 80 million (although the figures for some countries are disputed). The vast majority of them live in India, but this is much the largest nation in terms of both territory and population, and even here they are a small minority. There are nearly

five million in Pakistan, but in some countries their numbers are tiny.

The economy of India is booming, but its rural poor and urban slum-dwellers still run to hundreds of millions. In the other countries of the region poverty is also widespread. Bangladesh and Nepal are among the world's poorest nations; most people in Bhutan and the Maldives live at subsistence levels; the economies of Sri Lanka and Afghanistan have been severely affected by war. Even in the larger nation of Pakistan much of the population are impoverished.

The region is also politically unstable. Pakistan and Bangladesh have endured repeated political upheavals over several decades, with assassinations and military coups. The long civil war in Sri Lanka ended only in 2009; the conflict in Afghanistan drags on and on. Nepal and the Maldives have recently moved to multi-party systems after years of autocracy, and the long-term effects of these changes remain uncertain.

Some countries are particularly liable to natural disasters. Bangladesh, with its low-lying land, has suffered devastating floods and cyclones; thousands of people died in Cyclone Sidr in 2007. Sri Lanka has recently been affected by a severe drought that created desperate poverty in some parts of the country, and then by torrential monsoon rains that devastated the same areas. The appalling floods that swept

through large parts of Pakistan in July and August 2010 affected more than 17 million people and destroyed at least 1.2 million homes. Also the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004 struck the coasts of the region, causing thousands of casualties in Sri Lanka and India.

FIVE REPRESSIVE IDEOLOGIES

Within this large area, in which Christian minorities struggle to maintain their worship and witness in the midst of such grave instability, five ideologies dominate the various societies. Sometimes they are in competition with each other; sometimes they work in uneasy alliance; but everywhere they are bad news for the churches.

ISLAM (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Maldives)



Islam is the majority religion in four of the South Asian countries, commanding the adherence of between 90 and 100% of their citizens. Pakistan and Bangladesh were created as homelands for South Asian Muslims. Although they began their existence as secular states, the former was made an Islamic republic in 1956 and a theocratic state in 1973, while the latter adopted Islam as its state religion in 1988. Afghanistan is also an Islamic republic, and in the Maldives Islam is the only recognized religion.



The dominance of Islam in these nations poses immense problems for their Christian minorities.



Students at a Bible college in Bangladesh that Barnabas Aid has supported

Legal penalties. As in many Muslim-majority countries, Christians are liable to harassment and discrimination through the legal system. The most notorious example of this problem is Pakistan's "blasphemy law". Under its provisions, desecration of the Quran carries the punishment of life imprisonment, and defiling the name of Muhammad incurs a mandatory death sentence.

The law is often exploited to settle personal scores and grudges, and Christians are especially vulnerable to malicious, false accusation. Although no-one has yet been executed for blasphemy, many of those charged have spent months or years in custody while their cases are considered, and some have been murdered by zealous Muslims. Extremists in Bangladesh are demanding the introduction of similar laws there.

The Maldives adhere strictly to sharia law, and although the 2008 constitution introduced

Christian victim of the blasphemy law
Aasia Bibi (46), a Christian mother of five, is currently on death row in Pakistan. She was falsely accused in 2010 of insulting Muhammad and was prosecuted and convicted under the blasphemy law. If her appeal fails, she faces execution in November. Two prominent politicians, one Muslim and one Christian, who have taken up her cause have been assassinated during 2011.

widespread in these countries, where, as in most of the Islamic world, they are regarded as second-class. In Pakistan Christians are generally mistrusted, suspected of siding with the "Christian" West against their own country. Their educational opportunities are limited: they are given no instruction in their own faith and face many difficulties in obtaining university places. Most are from the poorest stratum of society, and many can get only the most menial jobs.

Anti-Christian discrimination in education and employment is common also in Bangladesh, while in the Maldives the existence of non-Muslims is barely recognized. The constitution expressly forbids them from becoming citizens, and a government minister has declared, "All Maldivians are Muslims." The small number of indigenous Christians are ostracized and carefully watched.

Violence. Violence against Christians has been characteristic of Islam almost from the first, and the South Asian countries see their share of this. In Pakistan individuals and whole Christian communities have been brutally attacked and their property destroyed, and in Bangladesh several Christians, including some evangelists, have been martyred in recent years. In war-torn Afghanistan, where the Taliban's violent insurgency has destabilized much of the country and cost so many lives, Christians are at particular risk of violence.

An Afghan martyr for Christ

A recently released video shows the beheading of an Afghan Christian, Abdul Latif, by the Taliban in Herat Province. One of the killers says, "All praise be to our creator almighty god that he helped and blessed the holy warriors... so that we can implement the commandment of god on this infidel ... he is punished according to the commandment of god so that it is a warning to other infidels." They shout "Allahu Akbar" ("god is great") over and over again during the murder, and they bring an execution notice to hang on the wall.

Ill-treatment of converts. All schools of Islamic law prescribe the death penalty for adult, male Muslims who choose to leave their religion. This "apostasy law" makes many Muslims in South Asia very hostile to Christian converts from Islam. Television footage of baptisms in Afghanistan in 2010 triggered a frenzied anti-Christian response, with leading political figures calling for the execution of converts. A number of Christians were arrested, and at least two were held for some months.

Forced conversion. Islam is a missionary faith, and Muslims' zeal for converts is sometimes expressed forcibly. This form of persecution is particularly severe in Pakistan, where some Muslim men abduct Christian girls, force them to convert to Islam, and then marry them. One estimate puts the annual number of forced conversions to Islam as high as 500 to 600.



The husband of Pakistani Christian Rukhsana Abass was murdered by a Muslim for not picking up trash quickly enough

many democratic changes, it contained no guarantee of freedom of religion. In Pakistan too elements of sharia have been implemented, and it has a significant place in the legal and taxation systems and in public life generally.

Discrimination. Social, political and legal discrimination against Christians is



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Buildings. In the Maldives there are no places of worship for non-Muslims, and Christian worship is allowed only in one's own home. A bill that criminalizes the public practice of non-Muslim worship, and the construction of non-Muslim buildings, won almost unanimous support in parliament in 2009, although it has not yet been passed into law. There are no church buildings in Afghanistan either except in one embassy, and in Pakistan they are easy targets for attack.

Natural disasters. Following the floods in Pakistan in 2010, local church leaders expected that hardly any international aid would reach the Christian minority. Before long a Pakistani national newspaper reported that displaced Christians were often excluded from receiving healthcare or food, as they were not being registered and therefore "supposedly do not exist".

HINDUISM, NATIONALISM, COMMUNISM (India, Nepal)



India and Nepal both have large Hindu majorities of around 75%. From 1960 until 2006 Nepal was officially designated as a Hindu kingdom, with Hinduism as its national religion. Following years of

political instability, an interim constitution established the country as a secular state in 2008, but Hindu extremists want to turn it back into a Hindu nation.

India is a secular and democratic state, but it too faces a challenge from Hindu extremism, which in this case is linked to an aggressive, strident form of nationalism. The Hindutva ("Hinduness") movement is striving to make India a single, culturally and religiously "pure" nation, and to return it to a supposed golden age when it was uninfluenced by "alien" cultures. It is particularly hostile to religions that it perceives as "non-Indian" because they entered the country from outside. Christianity is the primary target, because it is wrongly viewed as a colonial imposition, despite the fact that Indian Christians believe that it was the apostle Thomas who first brought the faith to their country.

Communism, specifically Maoism, also has a significant place in these two countries. The militant Naxalite movement is active in many parts of India, waging a long and violent campaign in pursuit of a communist state. A prolonged Maoist insurgency in Nepal helped to provoke the recent political changes, and the current government is dominated by Maoists.

These three ideologies, and the alliances and conflicts between them, frequently place Christians in their firing line, especially in India.

Evangelism and conversion. The success of Christian evangelism in both countries, and the conversion of many Hindus to Christianity, has made this a very sensitive issue. In India the concern has been exploited by Hindutva supporters. In seven states its political wing has secured the introduction of anti-conversion laws that restrict the freedom of non-Hindus to share their faith. They impose penalties for converting people by "force", "fraud" or "allurement" but in some places are used to prevent legitimate Christian evangelism.

In Nepal Hindu extremists are also very suspicious of the churches because of their recent growth. Converts to Christianity face social ostracism from their communities, and occasional hostility, discrimination or even violence. Christians suspected of encouraging conversion can be reported to the authorities, and may be fined or imprisoned. Proposed new legislation by the Maoist government threatens further to restrict evangelism and undermine freedom of religion and expression.

Discrimination. The Hindu caste system dictates people's occupations and often their economic circumstances. Most Christians are of low social status, and many are Dalits, who are seen as lower than the lowest caste. Corruption is rife in the police and courts, and it is difficult for Christians to get justice. Many offenses against them are inadequately investigated, and often no-one is prosecuted or convicted. Their unwillingness to play the system dishonestly counts against them. When Hindutva supporters become dominant in an



A Hindu temple in Nepal (Source: Ralf Lotys, Wikimedia Commons)

No justice in the courts
A recent report about the authorities' investigations into the mass violence in Kandhamal, Orissa State in 2008 illustrates how hard it is for Indian Christians to obtain justice, even for serious crimes against them. The state government acknowledged 52 fatalities, 38 of them Christians, during that period and the earlier violence in 2007. But the report showed that the authorities had made no attempt to record as murder those cases where victims did not die at the scene. When these are included, the number of Christian dead stands at 91. Only 20 cases had been brought to date, and there had been only one conviction for murder.



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area, anti-Christian discrimination is likely to become worse.

Violence. Assaults on Christian individuals and churches in India by Hindutva supporters are frequent and widespread. Pastors and local evangelists are particular targets. But in recent years there have also been some major outbreaks of mob violence against entire Christian communities. In Orissa State many Christians were killed and thousands left



This evangelist in Kandhamal, Orissa State, India lost his home and possessions in anti-Christian violence

Grim day in Karnataka

In a single day in December 2010 there were four attacks by Hindu extremists on Christians in the Indian state of Karnataka. Fifty Christians were threatened and terrorized when extremists attacked their church in a Bangalore slum. Four more were beaten up and dragged from their church buildings in the district of Shimoga. The assailants then had their victims arrested by police on charges of trying to convert Hindus. Another church in Bangalore was surrounded by a group of 40 extremists, throwing stones and shouting anti-Christian slogans.

homeless in two sets of attacks by Hindu nationalists in 2007 and 2008. In September 2008 there was also a series of 37 anti-Christian assaults in two or three days in Karnataka State, which were clearly organized and planned in advance. Since the Hindutva party came to power in Karnataka that year, there have been more than 200 anti-Christian incidents.

An Indian Christian leader said that Christians in the state were living in a "climate of fear, persecution and harassment". Earlier in the

year a Hindutva supporter in the Karnataka legislature vowed to "weed out" the seeds of Christianity.

Violence against Christians is rare in Nepal, but in May 2009 a bomb exploded in a large church in the capital, Kathmandu, during morning service. Three worshippers were killed and several others injured. Hindu extremists claimed responsibility and demanded that all Christians leave the country or their homes would be destroyed.

It is not only from Hindu nationalists that Christians in India are in danger of violence. The Naxalites, who are strongly anti-Christian, threaten the stability and security of a large area of rural India, running from the border of Nepal to the state of Andhra Pradesh and known as the Red Corridor. They also threaten the growth of the churches by infiltrating Christian communities.

BUDDHISM (Sri Lanka, Bhutan)



Buddhism is dominant in Sri Lanka and Bhutan and is practiced by more than 70% of the population in each country. Although it is not officially the state religion of Sri Lanka, the constitution does give it "the foremost place", and as a result it is protected and promoted. The government of Bhutan is headed by a Buddhist monarchy, and Mahayana Buddhism is said to be the state's "spiritual heritage". Only Buddhism and Hinduism are officially recognized in Bhutan, and the practice of other religions is technically illegal.

Despite a long history in Sri Lanka, Christians now number only some 8% of the population. In Bhutan the proportion is much smaller. Buddhism has a reputation for being peaceable and non-violent, but it is not notably tolerant of other religions. In both countries Christians are seriously disadvantaged in various ways.

Discrimination. Sri Lanka has a powerful Sinhalese Buddhist lobby that exploits the special status given to Buddhism by demanding privileges for itself at the expense of the Christians. Although this

pressure has not yet generated anti-Christian legislation, there are reports of discrimination against Christians in taxation, employment and education. Some Christians are also very poor and have to work in appalling conditions on tea and rubber plantations.

In Bhutan, the legal system is based on Buddhist precepts, and non-Buddhists are pressured by the majority, both officially and unofficially, to conform to traditional Buddhist values and norms. Again, there are also reports of discrimination in education.

Conversion. The Sinhalese Buddhist lobby in Sri Lanka also campaigns for legislation to control religious conversion, though so far they have not succeeded. Complaints against allegedly unethical or forced conversions have been lodged by some

Imprisoned for showing films on Christianity

In October 2010 Prem Singh Gurung was sentenced to three years in prison in Bhutan for screening films on Christianity. Gurung was arrested and was found guilty of "attempting to promote civil unrest" after local residents complained that he was showing Christian films in two villages. Two other Christians, who helped Gurung by bringing a portable generator to provide electricity for showing the film, were forced into hiding as police accused them of involvement in the offense and sought to arrest them.



This Pakistani Christian benefits from one of Barnabas Aid's feeding programs



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Buddhists, though Christians believe that these are directed against legitimate evangelism.

Although the constitution of Bhutan does not prohibit or restrict the right to convert or evangelize, some Christians are sufficiently concerned about interference from the authorities that they hold their

Anti-Christian violence in Sri Lanka
In early 2010 a mob of about 150 people, led by three Buddhist monks, attacked a church in Germanwatte, Pugoda, in the Gampaha district. They destroyed furniture and threatened the pastor with death unless he stopped Christian worship in the area. Some of the attackers spat in the face of his elderly mother.

Shortly before, two Christian community centers and a prayer center were damaged by mobs. A church hall that had been used for prayer and worship was attacked in Bandarawela, in the south of the country. Then around 200 people stormed a community center built by a local Christian church, in Mawathawewa in the north of Sri Lanka. Armed with rods, the mob destroyed the brand-new building and warned villagers not to intervene or call the police.

areas. They may be prosecuted if their activities are adjudged to be promoting “feelings of enmity or hatred” between different religious groups.

Violence. Buddhist extremism in Sri Lanka is expressed in organized opposition to some churches, especially in rural areas and places seen as Buddhist preserves. Christian buildings and church leaders are sometimes attacked. The Sinhalese Buddhist movement wants to impose its identity on the whole country, and some of its members are prepared to use force.

Buildings. In Bhutan Christians are generally free to worship in private homes, but church buildings are officially not allowed. In early 2011 it was reported that the Bhutanese government was considering recognizing Christianity officially, and this status would give the

churches the right to construct buildings for worship. However, only one Christian organization was likely to be recognized, which would be expected to represent all Christians, and the government’s intention might be to give itself more power to regulate Christian activities.

War and natural disaster. The Sri Lankan civil war was prolonged and bitter, and it ended only in 2009. It has left a malign legacy of violence and deprivation. Hundreds of thousands of people, some of them Christians, were displaced from their homes and took refuge in temporary camps. Many Christians are living in temporary huts, or in makeshift tents and shelters, and as members of a despised minority they are finding themselves overlooked in the building process.



Serious floods devastated central and eastern Sri Lanka in early 2011. Barnabas Aid sent provisions

Torrential monsoon rains in May 2010 brought devastation to large areas of west and south-west Sri Lanka, where around half the country’s Christians live. Then further floods between December 2010 and February 2011 ravaged the center and east of the country. Thousands were made homeless and put at risk of disease and snake bites. These floods followed a severe drought the previous year that had created desperate poverty among Christians in the region. Again, their low status in society gives them less defense against such disasters.

HELPING SOUTH ASIA’S CHRISTIANS

So here in a single region, albeit a vast one, are all the main causes of the pressure and persecution endured by Christians around the world. South Asia illustrates the rise of extremism among Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. It shows how nationalism is developing as a reaction against the influence of the West, foreign interference and

globalization. It reveals the continuing presence and power of communism, despite the dissolution of the former Eastern bloc. And it demonstrates the destructive impact of these repressive ideologies on Christian communities, especially in contexts of economic hardship, political turmoil and natural disasters.

Yet despite these immense difficulties, God is wonderfully at work in South Asia. The churches of India have seen remarkable growth in the last few decades, as evangelists and church planters have founded thousands of new congregations. Christians in Nepal have increased rapidly in numbers: until 1950 they were not even officially allowed to live there, and now there are over half a million. Church growth has also been reported in Bangladesh, and among some Sri Lankan denominations. Many of our brothers and sisters patiently endure their sufferings year after year in faithfulness to the Lord.

Barnabas Aid is providing assistance to various projects run by local Christians to help needy believers and strengthen the churches in their life and witness. These include feeding programs, income-generation projects, theological training, supplying Bibles and resources, support for pastors and evangelists, funding for Christian schools, provision of safe houses for converts and for Pakistani Christian women, legal aid for those suffering injustice, and many more. At present we are also working to provide simple homes for thousands of homeless Christians in India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. For more details on this project, please turn to pages 16-17.

Please also remember the Christians in South Asia in your prayers, asking the Lord to strengthen them to maintain their witness to Him in the face of hardship and distress, and that their sufferings will be relieved.



Barnabas sponsors Christian education for the neediest Christian children in India