

ERASING THE CROSS: HINDUTVA, THE ASSAULT ON CHRISTIANS, AND THE POLICY MAINSTREAMING OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM IN INDIA

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ABOUT CARE

The Center for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

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This white paper may include images and texts around topics such as sexual violence, physical violence, identity-based discrimination and harassment, and genocide. I encourage you to care for your safety and wellbeing while reading this paper.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Christians in India now face an average of two documented attacks every day. The United Christian Forum recorded 834 verified incidents of violence and intimidation against Christians in 2024, up from 127 in 2014, and monitoring groups estimate that 2025 closed near 900 incidents, the fifth consecutive record year and the worst violence the community has faced since independence.^{2,3,6} The violence has a lineage. Human Rights Watch documented its architecture as early as 1999, in the year a mob led by a local Bajrang Dal leader burned the Australian missionary Graham Staines and his two young sons alive in their vehicle in Odisha, and found then that the attacks were a coordinated political campaign of the Sangh Parivar carried out with state complicity.¹ A quarter century later the campaign has moved from the mob to the ministry. Anti-conversion laws in at least a dozen states criminalise religious choice, the foreign donations regime has stripped thousands of Christian institutions of funding, including, for a period, the order founded by Mother Teresa, and the violence has reached West Bengal within two months of a Hindutva government taking power there in 2026.

The international human rights system has registered the deterioration in unusually convergent terms. The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), in its 2026 Annual Report, found that religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate through 2025, recommended that India be designated a Country of Particular Concern, and recommended targeted sanctions on entities including the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).^{4,5} Human Rights Watch, releasing its World Report 2026, concluded that the Indian government has made violence against religious minorities, marginalised groups, and its critics a normal instrument of rule, driven by discriminatory policy, hate speech, and prosecutions aimed at opponents.³⁰ The UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, reviewing India in August 2026 for the first time since 2007, expressed grave concern at large-scale violations against ethno-religious groups, Dalits, and Adivasis.³² Amnesty International has urged India to adopt and act on the recommendations of its UN rights review.³⁴

Read through the culture-centered approach, these are faces of a single project. Street violence, statutory enclosure, and financial strangulation together form the infrastructure through which Hindutva, the political ideology of Hindu supremacy, erases the voices of religious minorities at the margins. This white paper documents this convergence as the policy mainstreaming of far right extremism: the movement of an extremist ideology from the mob to the statute book, the administrative order, and the budget line. It closes with implications for the New Zealand government as it deepens its economic and strategic relationship with India.

1. HINDUTVA AND THE MANUFACTURE OF THE INTERNAL ENEMY

Hindutva is a political ideology, formed in the early 20th century, that seeks to remake India as a Hindu nation. It is distinct from Hinduism, the plural and heterogeneous faith of over a billion people, and this distinction matters for any policy analysis: the targets of Hindutva include Hindus who dissent, and the diasporic communities most endangered by its transnational reach include ordinary Hindu families. The ideology is

carried by the RSS, a paramilitary organisation founded in 1925, and its family of organisations, the Sangh Parivar, which includes the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and its youth militia, the Bajrang Dal. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in power nationally since 2014, is the political wing of this family. Human Rights Watch, in its 1999 report *Politics by Other Means: Attacks Against Christians in India*, recorded a former RSS member describing the division of labour inside the family: the BJP as the body, the RSS as the soul, and the Bajrang Dal as “the hands for beating.”¹ USCIRF assesses today that the policy programme of the BJP-led government closely tracks the RSS’s Hindutva ideology and bears down on religious minorities in discriminatory ways.³⁶

The culture-centered approach directs attention to how communicative processes organise the erasure of communities at the margins. Within the Hindutva imaginary, the Christian, like the Muslim, is scripted as the internal enemy, the agent of a foreign faith who threatens the nation through conversion. The figure of the predatory converter does the ideological work: it converts the pastor into a criminal, the prayer meeting into an offence, the church-run school into a conspiracy, and the mob that attacks them into a defender of culture. This communicative inversion, in which the aggressor occupies the position of the victim and laws that extinguish religious freedom are titled freedom of religion acts, is the signature of the architecture documented below. The material substrate of the campaign was already visible to Human Rights Watch in 1999: the Christian institutions and individuals singled out for attack were precisely those promoting health, literacy, and economic independence among Dalit and Adivasi communities, and a vested interest in keeping those communities dependent animated both the violence and the propaganda.¹

2. FROM GRAHAM STAINES TO TODAY: THE KILLING OF MISSIONARIES

The murder of missionaries sits at the origin of the contemporary campaign. In January 1999, the Australian missionary Graham Staines, who had spent over three decades serving leprosy patients in Odisha, was trapped in his station wagon with his sons Philip, aged 10, and Timothy, aged six, outside the village church at Manoharpur, and the three were burned alive by a mob led by Dara Singh, identified by Human Rights Watch as a local leader of the Bajrang Dal. Human Rights Watch documented the killing within a broader wave that included the murders of priests, the rape of nuns, the destruction of churches, schools, colleges, and cemeteries, and the forced conversion of thousands of Christians to Hinduism, and concluded that the attacks were part of a concerted campaign by Sangh Parivar organisations to build political power through communal violence, supported at the local level by militant groups operating with impunity.¹ The same report records what followed in Odisha through 1999: Singh mutilated and burned a Muslim trader in August, and a week later the Catholic priest Arul Doss was shot with an arrow and beaten to death. Singh was later convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for the Staines murders, and the response at the time set the template that endures: the chief minister of Gujarat and BJP spokespeople blamed the violence on an international conspiracy to defame the party, and the Prime Minister answered the burning of a missionary and his children by calling for a national debate on conversions, a gesture Human Rights Watch read as tacit justification of the motives underlying the attacks.¹

Human Rights Watch’s field investigation in the Dangs district of Gujarat, where premeditated attacks unfolded across 10 days from Christmas Day 1998, documented the pattern that has since become national: Sangh organisations and local media circulating anti-Christian propaganda, mobs of one to two hundred arriving from outside the village, churches stripped and threatened with burning, worshippers coerced into declaring themselves Hindu, local and state officials complicit in the attacks, and the central government failing its constitutional obligation to protect minorities.¹ Every element of that 1999 description recurs in the incident reports of 2025 and 2026. The killing has continued alongside: the UCF’s monitoring categories today include murder and sexual violence,² and the Manipur violence documented in Section 5 claimed more than 260 lives and displaced over 60,000 people, most of them Christians.⁹

3. TWO ATTACKS A DAY: THE DOCUMENTED VIOLENCE

The most systematic record of anti-Christian violence in India is maintained by the United Christian Forum (UCF), a New Delhi based ecumenical body that runs a national helpline. Its data show a consistent year-on-year escalation across the decade of BJP rule: from 127 recorded incidents in 2014 to 505 in 2021, 734 in 2023, and 834 in 2024. By November 2025 the UCF had documented 706 incidents for the year, with the full-year figure estimated to approach 900, an average of at least two attacks on Christians per day.^{2,6,7} The incidents span physical violence, murder, sexual violence, intimidation and threats, social boycotts, damage to religious property, desecration of religious symbols, and disruption of prayer services. The 834 incidents of 2024 included 149 physical assaults, 209 cases of property damage, 798 cases of intimidation or harassment, and 331 instances in which Christians faced restrictions on religious gatherings despite the constitutional guarantee of worship.⁶

The Religious Liberty Commission of the Evangelical Fellowship of India documented 334 incidents of systematic targeting between January and July 2025, with Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh accounting for more than half.⁷ The geography is significant. The violence concentrates in states governed by the BJP and in Adivasi regions where Christianity is woven into Indigenous community life, which means the burden of Hindutva violence falls hardest on Dalit and Adivasi Christians, communities already at the margins of caste and economy, the same communities whose uplift Human Rights Watch identified in 1999 as the underlying provocation. The pattern is organised rather than spontaneous: mobs affiliated with the Bajrang Dal and allied Sangh organisations arrive at prayer gatherings with police in tow, the worshippers rather than the attackers are booked under anti-conversion laws, and many incidents go unreported because victims fear retaliation.⁸ Christian Solidarity International assesses 2025 as the worst year for anti-Christian violence since Indian independence in 1947, the fifth consecutive year in which the record was broken.³

4. BENGAL: THE NEWEST FRONT

West Bengal demonstrates how quickly the machinery moves once political power changes hands. Within two months of the BJP forming its first government in the state after the 2026 Assembly election, a coordinated wave of attacks on the state's tiny Christian minority, 0.7 percent of the population, swept across its districts. In the first week of July 2026 alone, an under-construction Presbyterian church was destroyed by a mob, the congregation of Grace Church at Faridpur was assaulted in the middle of Sunday service along with its pastor, and a Christian widow was harassed, a sequence that church leaders and the Catholic press linked directly to the change of government.^{26,27} The Bangiya Christiya Pariseba, the Bengal Christian Council, warned publicly of what appeared to its founding member Herod Mullick to be "systematic attacks on our churches", institutions, and community members, and described the now-familiar inversion in which the attacked are subsequently accused of forced conversion.²⁹

Through July and August the intimidation took on the character of an eviction campaign. In the South 24 Parganas district, Christians face ongoing violence from militants with apparent ties to the VHP. In Sandeshkhali, a self-identified VHP official confronted the pastor of Grace Community Church, accused him of receiving foreign funding, and ordered him out of the region; the following day the same man led a mob into a parish compound in Nazat village and gave the Claretian missionaries serving there seven days to leave, demanding that the faithful return to their ancestral religions.²⁸ The Bangladesh Christian Association across the border has raised formal concern for the safety of Bengal's Christians, and the violence against Christians runs alongside the documented targeting of Bengali Muslims: the Association for Protection of Civil Rights documented 34 incidents of alleged violence and intimidation against Muslims and political opponents across at least eight districts in the four days after the election results, including attacks on mosques, homes, and businesses, with at least two deaths reported.^{26,39} Bengal, a land whose political culture was built on communal

coexistence and whose Christian institutions have educated generations across faith lines, is being converted into a laboratory of the same conversion panic, and the speed of the conversion measures how mature the national infrastructure has become.

5. THE ASSAULT ON CHRISTIAN SPACES AND SITES

The clearest demonstration of what Hindutva mobilisation does to Christian spaces is Manipur. In the violence that erupted in May 2023 between the majority Meitei community and the predominantly Christian Kuki-Zo tribes, more than 260 people were killed, over 60,000 people were displaced, most of them Christians, and more than 11,000 homes and 360 churches were destroyed, along with church-run schools, theological colleges, and mission compounds.⁹ USCIRF documented the burning and damage of over 250 churches across the state and placed the destruction within the broader decline of religious freedom under discriminatory laws and practices.¹⁰ Armed groups such as Arambai Tenggol led the church burnings, and displaced believers report pressure to undergo ghar wapsi, the forced reconversion of religious minorities to Hinduism.¹¹

The targeting of Christian sites extends across the country and reaches its annual crescendo at Christmas. In December 2025, Hindu vigilante groups disrupted at least 60 Christmas-related events nationwide, from street intimidation of carollers in Kerala to raids on church services in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, and Assam. In Jabalpur, the BJP politician Anju Bhargava entered a church on Christmas Day and assaulted Safalta Kartik, a visually impaired woman attending the service. The Uttar Pradesh government kept schools open on 25 December, ending the observance of Christmas as a holiday, while a Hindu nationalist group in Chhattisgarh called for a statewide ban on Christmas Eve celebrations.³ The UCF, writing to the Prime Minister in December 2025, detailed mob violence following a Christian burial in Kanker, Chhattisgarh, the vandalism of Christmas decorations in Raipur, and inflammatory speeches followed by violence in Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh, and noted the contrast between these realities and the Prime Minister's carefully staged Christmas visit to a New Delhi cathedral.¹² In Rajasthan, within a fortnight of the state assembly passing its anti-conversion bill in September 2025, civil society groups documented nine incidents of harassment and assault, including the siege of the Hindustan Bible Institute in Jaipur by around 50 Bajrang Dal members.¹³ Churches face demolition drives, denial of burial grounds, and administrative closure; a Christian-run school in Rajasthan was shut down in early 2026 amid the same conversion panic.¹⁴

6. TARGETING THE MISSIONARIES OF CHARITY

The reach of the campaign is measured by its most famous target. The Missionaries of Charity, the Kolkata order founded by Mother Teresa, recipient of the Bharat Ratna and canonised as a saint, serves the destitute, the orphaned, and the dying through its homes across India. In December 2021, the order was booked under Gujarat's Freedom of Religion Act on allegations that girls at its Vadodara shelter home were being steered toward Christianity because they read the Bible and joined prayers, a first information report built on the visit of a district officer and a campaign of allegations by the chair of the national child rights commission.²⁴ On Christmas Day 2021, the Ministry of Home Affairs refused to renew the order's FCRA registration, citing unspecified adverse inputs, cutting the order's roughly 22,000 patients and employees off from the foreign donations that sustain its work; the registration was restored in January 2022 amid a national and international outcry.^{24,25} The choice of date was its own message. An order that asks nothing of the dying but their presence was branded a conversion racket, on Christmas, through the machinery of the state. Every pastor in a village prayer hall understood what the episode announced: if the Missionaries of Charity can be cut down by an administrative order, no Christian institution in India is safe.

7. THE LEGAL ARCHITECTURE: ANTI-CONVERSION LAWS

The street violence is licensed by law. At least a dozen Indian states have enacted anti-conversion statutes, nine of them under BJP governments; Human Rights Watch counted 12 such laws by the end of 2024, before Rajasthan added the harshest yet.^{15,31} Formally titled freedom of religion acts, these statutes criminalise conversion by force, fraud, or allurement, categories so elastic that prayer for the sick, charity, or education can be prosecuted as inducement. These laws invert the constitutional promise: Article 25 guarantees every Indian the right to profess, practise, and propagate religion, yet the statutes place the burden on the convert and the pastor to prove innocence, make offences cognisable and non-bailable, and empower any relative to file a complaint.

Rajasthan's Prohibition of Unlawful Conversion of Religion Act, passed on 9 September 2025 and brought into force by government notification later that year, is the most draconian version yet enacted. It prescribes sentences ranging from seven years to life imprisonment, fines reported to reach 10 million rupees, and the confiscation and demolition of properties used for what the state deems unlawful conversion.^{17,37} A person wishing to change their faith voluntarily must lodge a written declaration with the District Magistrate at least 90 days in advance, the officiating religious leader must give two months' notice, a police inquiry follows into the real intention and cause of the proposed conversion, and the declaration, with the person's details, is displayed publicly for objection, a design that legal analysts warn violates the right to privacy and functions as an invitation to vigilante targeting.^{16,37} The law exempts return to one's ancestral religion from the definition of conversion altogether, which states the project plainly: ghar wapsi campaigns to bring Christians and Muslims into Hinduism are protected, while movement in the other direction is criminalised.¹⁷

The laws are enforced. In January 2025, a special court in Uttar Pradesh sentenced Pastor Jose Pappachan and his wife Sheeja to five years in prison on conversion charges arising from ordinary pastoral work.¹⁸ Across the states with such laws, pastors are routinely arrested mid-service, and the UCF data show that the majority of mob attacks now unfold under the cover of conversion allegations, with police registering cases against the victims. USCIRF's 2026 report records that through 2025 the Indian government introduced and enforced new legislation targeting religious minority communities and their places of worship, while several states moved to introduce or harden anti-conversion laws with heavier sentences.¹⁹

8. STRANGLING THE INSTITUTIONS: THE DONATIONS REGIME

The third instrument is financial. The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), which licenses the receipt of overseas donations, has been converted from a transparency mechanism into a weapon of institutional strangulation. Since 2010, more than 22,000 organisations have had their FCRA registrations cancelled and a further 15,000 have seen registrations lapse without renewal; more than 10,000 of the affected organisations are Christian groups, and over 70 percent of the NGOs whose licences were allowed to expire in the January 2022 purge were aligned with Christian programmes.^{20,21,23} The casualties include the largest humanitarian institutions serving India's poor: World Vision India, the Church's Auxiliary for Social Action, and the Evangelical Fellowship of India all lost their registrations in 2024, the Missionaries of Charity faced the Christmas 2021 refusal documented above, and Compassion International was forced out of the country entirely.²¹ The Church's Auxiliary for Social Action alone had to terminate around 350 staff, with 90 percent of its relief and development work jeopardised.²² Human Rights Watch places the FCRA within a wider repertoire in which foreign funding rules, counterterrorism statutes, and manufactured financial investigations are turned against civil society groups, activists, and the political opposition.^{30,31}

A pending amendment moves from strangulation to seizure. Under the framework drafted in 2026, the government would take permanent control of the foreign contributions and assets of any organisation without

an FCRA licence, could transfer the property to its own departments or sell it on the open market, and would shield these decisions from challenge in the courts. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of India has called the framework dangerous and alarming, and the president of the All India Christian Council describes it as the legalised expropriation of the institutions of the Indian Christian community, its hospitals, schools, and social service organisations built over generations.²³ Rajasthan's anti-conversion law completes the circuit by attaching 10 to 20 year sentences to the receipt of foreign funding for anything deemed conversion, welding the donations regime to the criminal law.¹⁷

9. THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD

The findings of the major human rights bodies now converge on a single description. Human Rights Watch, whose 1999 investigation first named the anti-Christian campaign as Sangh politics by other means, concluded in its World Report 2026 that the BJP-led government vilified religious minorities through 2025, expelled hundreds of Bengali-speaking Muslims and Rohingya refugees, carried out unlawful demolitions of Muslim homes in defiance of a Supreme Court ruling, and made violence against religious minorities, marginalised groups, and its critics a normal instrument of governance, driven by discriminatory policy, hate speech, and prosecutions aimed at its opponents.³⁰ Its World Report 2025, covering 2024, recorded that Christians in BJP-run states risked mob attack over conversion allegations, and that the anti-conversion laws of at least 12 states have been used to harass religious minorities, especially Dalit and Adivasi Christians, while emboldening vigilante violence.³¹

The treaty bodies have joined the record. In August 2026, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reviewed India for the first time since 2007 and issued concluding observations registering grave concern over reported large-scale abuses by law enforcement against ethno-religious groups, Adivasis, Scheduled Castes and particularly Dalits, and non-citizens, abuses that ranged from racially motivated violence and extrajudicial killing to torture and sexual violence, and demanded impartial investigation with accountability for those responsible.³² In the dialogue, Committee experts pressed India on anti-Muslim hate speech and on freedom of religion for Dalits, a question that reaches the constitutional discrimination through which Dalits who convert to Christianity or Islam lose Scheduled Caste protections, a standing penalty on religious choice for the communities most represented among India's Christians.³³ Amnesty International, following India's Universal Periodic Review, has urged the government to promptly adopt and act on the recommendations made at the UN rights review.³⁴ USCIRF completes the convergence with its 2026 recommendation of Country of Particular Concern designation and targeted sanctions.⁴

10. THE POLICY MAINSTREAMING OF FAR-RIGHT EXTREMISM

What this white paper documents is a pipeline, and the pipeline is now a quarter century old. In 1999, Human Rights Watch described a fringe campaign: militant groups burning churches with impunity, local officials complicit, national leaders deflecting with talk of foreign conspiracies and debates on conversion.¹ The conversion panic manufactured in the shakhas and pamphlets of the Sangh now sits in the statute books of at least a dozen states. The demand to cut off Christian institutions from global solidarity, once a conspiracy theory about foreign hands, is now the administrative practice of the Ministry of Home Affairs, applied even to the order of Mother Teresa. The mob that burned Graham Staines and his children and the magistrate who publishes a convert's name for public objection operate within a single system of meaning, and the movement between them, from extremist ideology to state policy, is what I term the policy mainstreaming of far-right extremism. The state writes the ideology that animates the Bajrang Dal into law, then deploys the law to complete what the mob began.

This is also the assessment, in more diplomatic language, of the government-appointed watchdog of India's closest strategic partner. USCIRF's 2026 Annual Report found that religious freedom conditions in India continued to deteriorate in 2025 and recommended, for the seventh consecutive year, that the US State Department designate India a Country of Particular Concern, the classification reserved for the world's most severe violators, placing India among 18 such countries.⁴ The Commission recommended targeted sanctions, including asset freezes and entry bars, on individuals and entities responsible for or tolerant of severe violations, naming for the first time the RSS and the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) among those entities, and recommended linking future US security assistance and trade policy to measurable improvement.^{5,38} The naming of RAW registers a further dimension: the transnational repression through which the Indian state now targets religious minorities and their advocates beyond its borders, a concern examined at USCIRF's May 2026 hearing on India.³⁵ New Delhi's response was to dismiss the report as motivated and biased, the same reflex of denial Human Rights Watch recorded in 1999, when the violence was blamed on an international conspiracy to defame the ruling party.^{5,1}

11. POLICY IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NEW ZEALAND GOVERNMENT

Aotearoa New Zealand is deepening its relationship with India across trade, education, and security at precisely the moment the evidence of systematic religious persecution has become undeniable. A relationship built on wilful silence about that evidence would betray the commitments this country has made to itself, in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, in the Christchurch Call, and in the promise after March 15 that the targeting of communities of faith would never be met with indifference. The following implications flow from the analysis above.

First, religious freedom belongs on the bilateral agenda. As trade negotiations and ministerial visits multiply, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade should raise the persecution of Christians, Muslims, and Sikhs directly and on the record, drawing on the USCIRF findings, the Human Rights Watch record, the CERD concluding observations, and the UCF data rather than treating persecution as an internal matter. Human rights dialogue should be structured into the architecture of the relationship, with the anti-conversion laws, the FCRA regime, Manipur, and the Bengal escalation named specifically, so that engagement does not function as endorsement.

Second, trade policy requires human rights due diligence. New Zealand exporters, universities, and investors entering the Indian market should be supported with guidance on the risks of complicity in a legal environment where minority institutions face expropriation, and any government-to-government instruments should carry human rights language with review mechanisms, consistent with the approach New Zealand has advocated in other agreements.

Third, immigration and refugee determination must reflect the evidence. Country guidance used by Immigration New Zealand and the Immigration and Protection Tribunal should incorporate the documented escalation, including the two-attacks-a-day baseline, the criminalisation of conversion, and the specific vulnerability of Dalit and Adivasi Christians, Muslims, and the Kuki-Zo of Manipur, so that protection claims are assessed against current conditions rather than an outdated image of Indian secularism.

Fourth, New Zealand should act multilaterally. At India's Universal Periodic Review and in Human Rights Council statements, New Zealand should join the states raising anti-conversion laws and FCRA restrictions as violations of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration and the ICCPR, should press for implementation of the CERD concluding observations of August 2026, and should support calls for independent investigation of the Manipur violence.

Fifth, the domestic front matters. The same Sangh Parivar network whose entities USCIRF now recommends for sanction operates transnationally, including through affiliated organisations active in Aotearoa. Government agencies should exercise due diligence before funding, platforming, or partnering with Hindutva-aligned

organisations, distinguishing carefully between the Hindu community, which deserves full protection and celebration, and the political infrastructure of Hindutva, which imports the logics documented in this paper. Christian, Muslim, and Sikh members of the Indian diaspora who speak about persecution in India face surveillance and intimidation reaching into this country, and protection against transnational repression should be treated as a core community safety obligation.

The measure of a small country's foreign policy is whether its values survive contact with a large market. Two attacks a day, hundreds of churches burned in a single state, a missionary and his children burned alive at the campaign's founding, life imprisonment for changing one's faith, the order of Mother Teresa branded a conversion racket, and the legislated seizure of a minority's hospitals and schools are the facts on the table. New Zealand can engage India with honesty about them, or it can look away and call the looking away pragmatism.

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