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NEPAL'S GROWING HINDU NATIONALISM AND CHRISTIAN PERSECUTION

By Linda Burkle, PhD, ICC Fellow



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When we think about the persecution of Christians worldwide, countries like China, Nigeria, and North Korea come to mind. Rightfully so, these countries and others have demonstrated a consistent pattern of egregious human rights violations; social, communal, and/or governmental acts that penalize, ostracize, restrict, or physically harm Christians because of their faith.

Other nations, like Nepal, seldom come to mind.

I recently had the opportunity to speak with Pastor Gopal Sheila Sharma, who lives in Kathmandu, Nepal. He oversees 40 unregistered churches throughout Nepal. He became a Christian 44 years ago. As a result, he was shunned by his family. His wife is a sixth-generation Christian; her great-grandfather was instrumental in bringing Christianity to Nepal and translating the Bible into Nepali, leading to his expulsion from the nation.

Part 1: History of Christianity in Nepal

Portuguese Jesuit Father Juan Cabral brought Christianity to Nepal in the 1600s. The Malla kings of that era allowed missionaries to pass through and even preach, but no permanent church was established until 1715, when the kings welcomed Catholic Capuchin friars from the Vatican. They developed the first formal missions and evangelized in the Kathmandu Valley area. However, as Nepal became unified under King Prithvi Narayan Shah, who feared foreign influence, all Christians were expelled in 1769. This ban on Christianity lasted for 200 years, until 1951.

In 1951, the Rana regime fell, and Nepal opened its borders. Missionaries returned and established social services, schools, and hospitals, although they were banned from evangelizing locals. Some of these institutions continue to operate despite legal restrictions, providing valuable services to all religions in local communities. Whereas free public education ends after fifth grade, it is noteworthy that many Hindus then choose to send their children to the established Catholic schools, which provide a superior education.¹

Throughout the decades, the church grew, primarily through Nepali-speaking Christians coming from India. After the 1990 democratic revolution, Christianity expanded significantly and continues to grow, although it still represents a small percentage of the population.²

In the most recent census³, the Nepali population by religion was as follows:

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- **Hinduism:** 81.19% (23.6 million)
 - **Buddhism:** 8.21% (2.3 million)
 - **Islam:** 5.09% (1.4 million)
 - **Kirat** (Indigenous nature-based faith): 3.17%
 - **Christianity:** 1.76%
 - **Others / Unstated** (Includes Prakriti, Bon, Sikhism, and Jainism): .58%
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Despite the dramatic shift in governance since 2008, Nepal's identity remains deeply rooted in Hindu culture, religious beliefs, legal systems, and traditions. Currently, Nepal has the highest percentage of Hindus of any nation.⁴

Part 2: Nepal's Constitutionally Granted Rights and Discriminatory Application

For centuries, Nepal was a "Hindu Kingdom" ruled by a monarchy established in 1978 by King Prithvi Narayan Shah until it was abolished in 2008. As the world's last official Hindu nation, Nepal transitioned in 2008 to a secular democratic republic, with a constitution formally ratified in 2015.

Nepal's constitution establishes freedom of religion and prohibits discrimination based on religion. Although the constitution establishes some protection for religious minorities, it does so vaguely enough to allow a law today that criminalizes proselytization.

"Nepal's legal framework provides only limited protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief. Article 4(1) of Nepal's constitution establishes the country as secular. Article 18 prohibits state and non-state actors from discriminating based on religion, and Article 26(1) further provides that every individual 'who has faith in religion shall have the freedom to profess, practice, and protect' his or her religion. However, Nepal's legal framework also violates international human rights law's protections for the right to freedom of religion or belief by criminalizing proselytism, blasphemy, and cow slaughter."⁵

Proselytism and the Cost of Conversion

According to Pastor Gopal, the aim of Nepal's Hindu majority is twofold: "to make Nepal known as 'the only Hindu country,' attracting Hindus from all over the world, as a destination for Hindu tourism, and promotion of the Hindu temple. The second aim is to suppress Christian conversion."⁶

"Chapter 19 of the Muluki Ain, or general code of Nepal, states that 'no one shall propagate any religion in such manner as to undermine the religion of other nor shall cause other to convert his or her religion.' Religious minorities are regularly arrested and charged under this law, which goes beyond its neighbor India's ban on forcibly converting another to criminalizing participation in the act of conversion in any way at all. In Nepal, proselytization carries with it the threat of up to six years in prison and subsequent deportation in the case of foreigners."⁷

In a December 2025, a UNOHR issued a report stating "Nepal must close the gap between clear constitutional and legislative provisions and their meaningful implementation to effectively prohibit discrimination against persons belonging to minorities, including Dalits, a U.N. expert said today ... Levrat warned about the curtailment of religious freedom, through selective use of the anti-conversion provision, leading to discrimination against religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians."⁸

"Converts from Hinduism are far and away the most vulnerable, with pressure coming from local government, Hindu extremists and families. Christian converts are viewed as those who have left the traditional faith of Nepal and betrayed Nepali identity. Members of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches may also be targeted. By and large, persecution is most severe in rural areas."⁹

Community-level ostracism marginalizes Christians through boycotting their businesses, which is particularly devastating in small and remote communities with only local customers. At times, Christians will be denied basic services such as access to food and use of community wells. Christian children are not permitted to attend school and are often harassed and mistreated. Pastors have been arrested on accusations of distributing Christian material and evangelism, with dubious evidence and no due process of law.

Another impediment is burial traditions and beliefs. Hindus believe the body must be cremated to free the soul to progress to a higher level. Not doing so creates haunted areas. As a result, Christians who wish to bury their dead loved ones often have difficulty accessing land to do so, especially in the Kathmandu Valley. Moreover, in Hindu tradition, the eldest son is responsible for conducting the Hindu funeral rites, including cremation. Out of a sense of responsibility, new converts often postpone following Jesus until after their parents' death.¹⁰

Nepalese society is defined by the Hindu caste system, which affects all areas of life. Everyone is born into a caste that defines their identity culturally, socially, and economically. A higher caste member's conversion to Christianity results in being relegated to the lowest caste. They become untouchable because they have embraced a foreign god. Their entire life is upended by multiple losses, rejection, isolation, and possibly violence. For this reason, the Dalits, called the "untouchables," the lowest Hindu caste, are the most receptive to the gospel message. Jesus Christ offers hope, acceptance, love, and a future that is unattainable in Hinduism.

According to Pastor Gopal, many tormented by evil spirits and those with illnesses have been delivered and healed by the power of Christ. Thousands who sought help from traditional Hindu healers without results came to the church and received miraculous healing. The testimonies have led many to faith in Christ despite the anti-Christian climate. However, converts face multiple pressures and hostilities within their families and communities.¹¹

"Despite Nepal's anti-proselytism laws, the number of Christians in the country has surged in recent years. While exact figures are difficult to estimate, reports indicate a notable increase over the last decade, with most converts among Dalits or indigenous peoples. In Nepal's Dhading district alone, missionaries have established nearly 70 churches, relative to nearly 8,000 throughout the country. Nonetheless, some politicians, including Nepal's former deputy prime minister, Kamal Thapa, view the proliferation of Christianity as a threat. In January 2023, Thapa publicly described Christianity as "spreading like wildfire," and continues to urge Nepal to enforce the anti-proselytism law and for the country to return to its identity as a Hindu state."¹²

Hindu extremists have maximized the political unrest and instability of 2025 to target religious minorities, leading to increased attacks on churches, assaults, and imprisonment of Christians during the past year. As a result, Nepal is once again back in the Top 50 of the World Watch List after a three-year absence.¹³

Arbitrary Application of Blasphemy Law

“Article 156 of Nepal’s National Penal Code Act, 2017, provides that ‘no person shall outrage the religious feelings of any caste, race, community or class’ through ‘spoken or written’ words or through ‘visual representation or signs or otherwise.’ Violations of Article 156 are punishable by imprisonment for up to two years and a fine of up to 20,000 Nepalese rupees (\$150).”¹⁴

As referenced previously, Article 156 is inconsistent with international human rights law, which protects freedom of expression and opinion. “The international normative is clear: States may not impose punishment for insults, criticism, or giving offence to religious ideas, icons or places, nor can law be used to protect the feelings of religious communities.”¹⁵

Considering the growing anti-Christian media rhetoric amid a rise in Hindu nationalism, it is apparent that blasphemy laws are applied selectively and with total disregard for the rights of minorities. Not surprisingly, there has been an increase in violent attacks against Christians.

Prohibition of Cow Slaughter

Cows are considered the country’s national animal and sacred to Hinduism. As such, they must be protected. According to Nepal’s Penal Code Act, 2017, Article 289(1), no person shall “do, or cause to be done, any act with the intention of killing, or causing harm to, any cow or ox.” Killing a cow or ox is punishable by imprisonment for up to three years and six months and a fine of 5,000 Nepalese rupees (\$375) for causing hurt or harm to a cow or ox.¹⁶

Despite the ban on cow slaughter, the Limbus, an indigenous tribal group that primarily lives in Dharan, continue their tradition of eating beef, often leading to arrest. Christians in that region are also targeted and accused, which fuels violent protests by radical Hindus. The local administration has responded to the increasing violence by imposing a curfew.¹⁷

The social implications go far beyond eating beef; those who do are considered unclean and ostracized. “Many people say Christianity is a foreign religion and that we eat cows. It goes so far that they will not touch us because of that. Some will not even eat food that they believe was touched by a Christian. My mother-in-law even told me that, as a Christian, I cannot touch her body when she dies.”¹⁸

Part 3: 2026 Elections Results and Implications for Nepali Christians

In 2025, Nepal experienced deadly youth-led “Gen Z” protests over the social media ban, corruption, and nepotism, culminating in regime change and the dissolution of the parliament. In September, the social media platform Discord was used to select Nepal’s first female prime minister, Sushila Karki, to lead an interim government. The 73-year-old former chief justice is known for her firm anti-corruption stance. Her main responsibility was to oversee elections in early 2026. Christians were hopeful that the transition would lead to a more inclusive, secular government. As one report noted, “An ideological shift has occurred in Gen Z. They have roundly rejected the controversial firebrand Hindu nationalist, Durga Prasai, on social media and seem to be in favour of maintaining a secular, federal structure.”¹⁹

Nepal’s 2026 Election

As planned, the highly anticipated general elections took place on March 5 to “elect 275 members of the House of Representatives. The Rashtriya Swatantra Party won 125 of the 165 seats under direct voting in Nepal’s parliamentary polls as vote counting under the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system concluded on Tuesday, putting it in a strong position to form a majority government.”²⁰ The number of youth voting was unprecedented and contributed to the Rastriya Swatantra Party’s landslide election victory. The RSP win caused the near-collapse of the Hindu nationalist Rastriya Prajatantra Party, which was reduced from 14 seats to just one, helping secure Nepal’s secular constitution. The new parliament has younger, more educated members who are not as opposed to Christians and other religious minorities as were their predecessors.²¹ The RSP has put forward rapper and ex-Kathmandu mayor Balendra Shah as its prime ministerial candidate, defeating the former Nepalese Prime Minister Sharma KP Oli in his parliamentary constituency. In March 2026, Shah became Nepal’s youngest prime minister.²² Christians are hopeful that persecution will diminish under the new regime.

Despite the optimism, church leaders remain cautious, considering that the new leaders within the RSP party have in the past espoused anti-Christian views. One factor, the heavyweight in the room, is the effect of India's recent election.

India’s Outsized Influence

Until recently, Christians in Nepal have been more protected from state-sanctioned discrimination and violence than their counterparts in neighboring India. The radicalized Hinduism that has long devastated Christians in India is increasingly evident in Nepal. Pastor Gopel has experienced the increased pressure and targeting of his churches firsthand. Particularly, the pastors of large city churches and those nearest to the border with India have experienced violence. There is an open border with India, and no visa is required to move between the nations. Radicalized Hindus from India move freely between the neighboring states, targeting pastors and churches; some pastors have been beaten, and churches vandalized. Gopal has been blacklisted in India and is not allowed in the country. He states that the emphasis on pro-Hindu policies has created a hostile environment, with the media fomenting anti-Christian public sentiment.²³ There is also evidence suggesting that pro-Hindu nationalists who control India are directly funding the increasing violence toward religious minorities in Nepal.²⁴

The Effects of India’s Election Results on Nepal

In addition, India’s political ideologies have an outsized influence on Nepal. In recent years, Indian political leaders have increasingly pushed for the “Hinduization” of India, leading to a dramatic increase in violence toward Christians. This trend was significantly strengthened in the recent election held the first week in May 2026.

“India’s ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has secured a sweeping set of state-level victories, tightening its political grip across key regions and signaling a renewed phase of consolidation under Prime Minister Narendra Modi — a development that observers warn could carry serious consequences for the country’s religious minorities ... the results point to a significant resurgence for Modi following a

weakened national showing in 2024 ... a recalibrated strategy that shifts power to regional governments, where persecution of religious minorities is often most acute.”²⁵

The results of India’s election solidify the Hindu nationalist agenda for the near future and undoubtedly will lead to more violence and targeting of Indian minorities, such as Christians and Muslims. Likewise, Hindu nationalists in Nepal will be even more emboldened given the victory in India, leading to increased acts of religious violence and false accusations against Christians and other religious minorities.

Despite increased persecution, Christianity is growing in Nepal. We, as the church, are called to support, advocate for, and intercede on behalf of our persecuted brothers and sisters. Thankfully, organizations such as International Christian Concern (ICC) exist for this very reason. But each of our voices and actions is needed.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

— Matthew 5:10

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