India listed among ‘countries of particular concern’ in US religious freedom report - USCIRF

In the 2020 edition of its annual report on International Religious Freedom, the USCIRF alleged that in 2019, religious freedom conditions in India "experienced a drastic turn downward", with religious minorities under increasing assault.

A US commission mandated to monitor religious freedom globally asked the State Department to designate 14 nations, including India, as "countries of particular concern", (CPC) alleging that religious minorities are under increasing assault in these nations.

These include nine countries that the State Department designated as CPCs in December 2019 - Myanmar, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - as well as five others - India, Nigeria, Russia, Syria, and Vietnam.

However, two of the nine members have expressed their dissent over the USCIRF recommendation to place India in the CPC.

Established by the US Government in 1998 after the inaction of the International Religious Freedom Act, recommendations of USCIRF are non-binding to the State Department.

India’s view on report

1. Traditionally, India does not recognize the view of the USCIRF.
2. For more than a decade, it has denied visas to members of the USCIRF.
3. India has earlier said that the American body on international religious freedom has chosen to be guided only by its biases. The Ministry of External Affairs had rejected the USCIRF statement as neither “accurate nor warranted” and questioned the body’s “locus standi” in India’s internal affairs.
4. India has previously described the comments by the USCIRF and a “few individuals” over violence in the national capital as “factually inaccurate, misleading” and an attempt to politicise the issue.

Reasons cited

“India took a sharp downward turn in 2019,” the commission noted in its report, which included specific concerns about

1. the Citizenship Amendment Act,
2. the proposed National Register for Citizens,
4. “The national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national-level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims.”

The USCIRF alleged that during 2019, discriminatory policies, inflammatory rhetoric, and
tolerance for violence against minorities at the national, state and local level increased the climate of fear among non-Hindu communities.

The report also mentioned about communal riots in Delhi in February 2020, alleging that there were reports of Delhi police, operating under the Home Ministry’s authority, failing to halt attacks and even directly participating in the violence.

The USCIRF 2020 report makes a specific mention of Home Minister Amit Shah, for not taking what it deemed as sufficient action to stop cases of mob lynching in the country, and for referring to migrants as “termites”. In December 2019, the USCIRF had also asked the U.S. government to consider sanctions against Mr. Shah and “other principal leadership”

Recommendations made by USCIRF to state department

The USCIRF recommended to the State Department to impose targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

Among others, it recommended the State Department to allocate funding to support civil society to create a monitoring and early warning system in partnership with police to challenge hate speech and incitement to violence.

The US Congress should continue to hold hearings highlighting religious freedom conditions in India and US policy toward India, the USCIRF said

In 2005, Prime Minister Narendra Modi who was at the time the Chief Minister of Gujarat was censured by the USCIRF. The commission had recommended sanctions against Mr. Modi for the 2002 riots and the U.S. government had subsequently cancelled his visa.