

US accuses India of curbing free expression on basis of religion

15/10/2015 17:04 by admin

Washington: The US state Department on Wednesday suggested that authorities in India continued to enforce laws designed to protect "religious sentiments" which at times had the effect of limiting free expression related to religion.

Six out of 29 state governments in India enforced existing "anti-conversion" laws, said the congressionally-mandated 2014 International Religious Freedom Report released by US Secretary of State John Kerry.

There were also reports of religiously motivated killings, arrests, coerced religious conversions, religiously motivated riots, and actions restricting the right of individuals to change religious beliefs, it said.

Citing a case of restricting free expression on basis of religion, the report said, on September 24 police in Rustampura, Gujarat, arrested Mehdi Hasan, a Muslim cleric, on charges of insulting Hindus' religious sentiments.

He was arrested after a member of the Hindu community complained about Hasan's comments during an interview with a Gujarati newspaper. Hasan had reportedly labelled those who honoured the nine-day Hindu festival Navratri as "demonic", it said.

Hasan remained in judicial custody until serving out his sentence on October 2.

"Some government officials made discriminatory statements against members of religious minorities," the report said.

"In some cases, local police failed to respond effectively to communal violence, including attacks against religious minorities, although local officials used broad authorities to deploy police and security forces to control outbreaks of religiously motivated violence."

The local non-governmental organization (NGO) Act Now for Harmony and Democracy reported over 800 religiously-motivated attacks from May through the end of the year, it said.

Police arrested Christians and Muslims for alleged "coerced conversion" of Hindus, the report said. The Shivpuri district administration in Madhya Pradesh arrested four Hindu Dalits for converting to Islam.

Hundreds of legal cases remained pending from violence during the 1984 anti-Sikh riots and the 2002 Gujarat riots.

The Nanavati-Mehta Commission on the 2002 riots ultimately released its Final Report on November 18, but some NGOs called into question the impartiality of the findings.

Court cases related to the 2008 anti-Christian violence in Odisha continued, resulting in convictions for people responsible for the public rape of a nun during the 2008 Odisha riots.

Displaced Kashmiri Hindu Pandits continued to seek redress for crimes committed against them and their houses of worship by Kashmiri insurgents in the 1990s, the report said.

In its global overview, the report said, in 2014, non-state actors committed some of the world's most egregious abuses of religious freedom and other human rights.

Government failure, delay, and inadequacy in combating these groups often had severe consequences for people living under significant and dire restrictions on, and interference with, their exercise of freedom of religion, it said

Other concerning trends over the year included significant increases in the number of recorded anti-Semitic incidents, and increasing restrictions on religious liberty imposed under the pretext of combating terrorism and violent extremism, the report said.

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