Peer Reviewed

Volume 7
Issue I

ISSN 2582-0311 (Print)
ISSN 2582-0303 (Online)

August 2025

VIPS STUDENT LAW REVIEW

VIVEKANANDA INSTITUTE OF PROFESSIONAL STUDIES - TECHNICAL CAMPUS

Affiliated to GGSIP University, Delhi
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Volume 7, Issue I August, 2025 ISSN 2582-0311 (Print)
ISSN 2582-0303 (Online)

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FAITH AND LAW AT CROSSROADS: UNRAVELING THE COMPLEXITIES OF CULT CRIMES IN INDIA'S SOCIO-LEGAL FRAMEWORK

VIPS Student Law Review
August 2025, Vol. 7, Issue 1, 46-57
ISSN 2582-0311 (Print)
ISSN 2582-0303 (Online)
© Vivekananda Institute of Professional Studies
https://vslls.vips.edu/vslr/

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ABSTRACT

The research article delves into the intricate relationship between religious freedom, cult crimes, and religious extremism from both legal and criminological perspectives. It examines how the Supreme Court of India defines religion, encompassing beliefs, practices, and obligations toward one's creator, while also recognizing its spiritual dimensions. A key focus is the distinction between cults and legitimate religious institutions, analyzing how essential practices and denominational identity shape this differentiation. The research article explores the fundamental right to profess, practice, and propagate religion, highlighting the fine balance between individual freedoms and state-imposed limitations in the interest of public order. It also sheds light on the challenges of identifying cultic organizations, particularly where spiritual manipulation and abuse blur the lines between faith and exploitation. By navigating the complexities of religious freedom, this research article emphasizes the pressing need for regulatory measures to address cult activities while safeguarding constitutional rights. It seeks to uncover how law and society can coexist in ensuring both personal belief and public safety in India's diverse religious landscape.

Keywords- *Religious, Crimes, Cult, Charismatic leaders, Freedom, Fundamental Right.*

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1.INTRODUCTION

Recent reports highlight the alarming rise of cult-related crimes, including murder, rape, money laundering, and human trafficking. Once seen as alternatives to traditional religion, cults now pose serious threats. Scholars like Glock and Stark differentiate cults and sects by belief systems, while Lofland sees cults as deviating from societal norms. According to Dohram, "*the concept of 'cult' will refer to that group, secular-religious, or both, that has deviated from what our American Society considers normative forms of religion, economics, or politics, and has substituted a new and often unique view of the individual and his world."*[1]

Modern-day cults share a common characteristic: a charismatic spiritual leader or self-proclaimed Godman who claims divinity and presents himself as a messenger of God[2]. These leaders manipulate their followers, who, driven by blind faith, often dedicate their lives to them. In recent times, cult leaders have weaponized their followers against the state, using them to carry out illegal activities under the guise of spirituality[3]. Many such leaders and organizations exploit socio-religious sentiments to amass wealth and power, engaging in crimes like fraud, human trafficking, and sexual abuse. In India, figures like Ram Rahim, Vasudev, Nithyananda, and Asha Ram Bapu have challenged law and order, causing social and economic setbacks. Despite serious allegations, lack of evidence, witness unavailability, and fear prevent legal action is prevented[4]. The absence of a clear legal distinction between cults and religions, particularly under Articles 25-28[5], further complicates judicial and executive interventions. With no specific legislation addressing cult-related crimes, offences are dealt with under general laws like the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, often resulting in inadequate punishment[6]. Cults wield immense financial and legal power, using extensive resources to manipulate the system. Addressing this growing concern requires urgent legal and policy measures to curb their unchecked influence[7].

1 H.T. Dohrman, California Cult: The Story of 'Mankind United', (Beacon Press 1979).

2 Gergely Rosta, Charles Y. Glock Und Rodney Stark: Religion and Society in Tension (1965), 221–29 (Springer eBooks 2019).

3 H. T. Dohrman, California Cult: The Story of 'Mankind United', (Beacon Press 1979).

4 Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale - the man who dishonoured the Sikh Faith, ANI News (June 5, 2020), https://www.aninews.in/news/national/general-news/jarnail-singh-bhindranwale-the-man-who-dishonoured-the-sikh-faith20200605150431/ (last visited Jan. 26, 2025).

5 India Const. arts. 25–28.

6 Aditya Indla, Bhindranwale: *How One Controversial Religious Figure Threatened the Unity of India,* 13 Hist. in The Making (2020)

7 The untold story before Operation Bluestar, India Today (Nov. 30 1999), https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/the-big-story/story/20140210-operation-bluestar-indira-gandhi-singh-bhindranwale-army-800031-1999-11-30 (last visited Jan. 26, 2025).

2. CULT CRIME IN INDIA

Cults in India are not a new phenomenon. The country, home to Buddhism and Jainism, which were once considered cults for deviating from Hinduism, has witnessed various spiritual groups throughout history. Some, such as the Brahma Kumaris, Aghori Babas, and Dayan cult, have unique practices but are not as commercially or politically motivated as modern cultic organizations[8]. However, deceptive self-styled godmen have long existed, exploiting spirituality for wealth and power. Figures like Rajneesh and Ram Rahim amassed immense political influence and blind devotion, committing heinous crimes while evading scrutiny. Their exploitation extends beyond the economy to human resources, creating significant social and legal challenges[9].

Cults destabilize public order, as seen in Bhindranwale's manipulation of faith for separatist violence, leading to Operation Blue Star. Similarly, Rampal's armed standoff and the violent riots after Gurmeet Ram Rahim's conviction highlight the dangers of blind faith. Cases like Asaram Bapu's rape conviction and Nithyananda's escape expose how these figures exploit legal loopholes. Superstition and political backing fuel their unchecked rise[10]. These cults operate as businesses, accumulating tax-free wealth and establishing parallel power structures that challenge democracy. India must differentiate cults from legitimate religious practices, strengthen legal frameworks, and regulate such organizations before they cause irreversible harm[11].

3. CULT AND RELIGION: TRACING THE DIFFERENCE

India's religious diversity extends beyond major religions to sects, cults, and intra-community practices that are often categorized as religious denominations. Various institutions guide individuals to follow specific spiritual leaders and adopt their teachings. The country is home to temples, mosques, churches, ashrams, deras, and other religious places, making the

8 Aditya Menon, Militant or Martyr? Decoding Cult of Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, The Quint (2021), https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/jarnail-singh-bhindranwale-harbhajan-jazzyb-operation-bluestar-sikhs-punjab (last visited Jan 27, 2025).

9 Uday Mehta & A.K. Desai, Modern Godmen in India: A Sociological Appraisal (Popular Prakashan 1993)

10 Tejas Mehta, *After rationalist Narendra Dabholkar's killing, Maharashtra govt clears anti-superstition ordinance,* NDTV India (2013), https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/after-rationalist-narendra-dabholkars-killing-maharashtra-govt-clears-anti-superstition-ordinance-532296 (last visited Jan. 27, 2025).

11 Abraham Thomas, Supreme Court refuses to entertain plea against fake godmen, Hindustan Times (2021), https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/supreme-court-refuses-to-entertain-plea-against-fake-godmen-101611158375645.html (last visited Jan. 27, 2025).

distinction between cult and religion complex[12]. Legally differentiating cults from religions is a challenge, especially in a multi-religious democracy where fundamental rights must be balanced. Labeling a group as a cult carries a social stigma and often implies illegitimacy or immorality. Indian courts assess religious denominations on a case-by-case basis, as no uniform definition of religion exists. The legal challenge lies in defining the parameters that religious groups enjoy and determining the authority that classifies them. Cults generally emerge from established religions, forming exclusive groups of devoted followers[13]. Some arise due to marginalization, offering alternative spiritual paths. However, cult members see themselves as religious believers rather than cultists, making it difficult to distinguish voluntary faith from coercion. Only when a group exhibits deviant or harmful behavior does the question of labeling it as a cult arise[14]. Historically, major religions like Buddhism and Christianity were once considered cults. Cults often fill social and spiritual gaps, evolving. The rise of charismatic leaders is a common feature, yet religions like Islam and Christianity also began with such figures. Philosophically, time is the true differentiator between cult and religion.

Modern religious movements are diverse and often misunderstood, facing stigma in secular societies. Indian law recognizes certain sects as religious denominations under Article 26[15]. In the *Shirur Mutt* case[16], the Supreme Court affirmed that sects and sub-sects within Hinduism qualify as religious denominations, highlighting how religious evolution often blurs the lines between cult and mainstream religion. In *Sastri Yagnapurushadji[17]* case Justice Gajendragadkar observes-

> *Buddha started Buddhism; Mahavir founded Jainism; Basava became the founder of Lingayat religion, Dnyaneshwar and Tukaram initiated the Varakari cult; Guru Nank inspired Sikhism; Dayananda founded Arya Samaj, and Chaitanya began Bhakti cult; and as a result of the*

12 A Sura and B Mukherjee, *Rampal's commandos attack cops, cops attack journalists,* The Times of India, Nov. 19, 2014.

13 30 killed as Ram Rahim supporters run riot, prohibitory orders in Delhi: Top stories to bring you up to date, Hindustan Times (2017), https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/30-killed-as-ram-rahim-supporters-run-riot-prohibitory-orders-in-delhi-top-stories-to-bring-you-up-to-date/story-Rccp5bRr50YZh5v8CA4DiM.html (last visited Jan. 27, 2025).

14 Stephen A. Kent, *Deviance Labelling and Normative Strategies in the Canadian 'New Religions/ Countercult' Debate,* 15 Canadian J. Soc. 393 (1990).

15 India Const. art. 26.

16 Comm'r, Hindu Religious Endowments, Madras v. Sri Lakshmindra Thirtha Swamiar of Sri Shirur Mutt, AIR 1954 SC 282.

17 Sastri Yagnapurushadji v. Muldas Bhudardas Vaishya, AIR 1966 SC 1119.

> *teachings of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, Hindu religion flowered into its most attractive, progressive, and dynamic form. If we study the teachings of these saints and religious reformers, we would notice an amount of divergence in their respective views; but underneath that divergence, there is a kind of subtle indescribable unity which keeps them within the sweep of the broad and progressive Hindu religion.*[18]

Sects and cults emerge as a result of internal dissatisfaction and conflicts, which swiftly institutionalize themes for the religious organization's existence. This is an unavoidable part of any religion, and it serves as the foundation for new religious denominations and practices. The judicial trend described in the previous section of this chapter showed that a number of religious groups sought and were granted religious denomination status. As stated in *Sastri Yagnapurushadji*, sects and cults that arose from traditional religions are quite similar to them, and so every cult or sect has a potential to be classified as a religious denomination in absence of any overt deviant acts.

4. CULTS AND RELIGION: LEGAL DISTINCTIONS AND CONSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Distinguishing between freedom of religious belief and religious expression is crucial, as both are integral to religious freedom. International human rights law treats religion neutrally, without assessing the validity of beliefs. Since religious freedom is not contingent on factual truth, cults should not be categorized separately under human rights standards. A cult resembles a religious organization when it systematizes worship, initiation, governance, and doctrine, evolving through three stages: (i) worship patterns, (ii) theology development, and (iii) organizational structuring. These align with legal criteria for religious denominations, as seen in Supreme Court rulings. However, defining a cult versus a religion remains complex due to evolving jurisprudence.

Indian courts have recognized sects like the Gowda Saraswath Brahmins, Chishti Sufis, and Dawoodi Bohras as religious denominations due to historical ties with established religions. In *Indian Young Lawyers Association V. State of Kerala* (Sabarimala case), the Supreme Court ruled that religious denominations must possess property in continuous succession and maintain exclusive practices. In *Auroville Foundation V. Govt. of India*, the Court emphasized societal recognition in determining religious status, increasing the likelihood of cults gaining legal recognition. Unless their activities violate public morality, health, or fundamental rights, cults generally fall within the legal definition of religion.

18 Sastri Yagnapurushadji v. Muldas Bhudardas Vaishya, AIR 1966 SC 1119.

The Essential Religious Practices (ERP) Test helps determine constitutional protection for religious practices. The Supreme Court has emphasized that essentiality must be assessed within the faith itself. While many cults adopt traditional customs, some engage in harmful practices like excommunication, circumcision, and human sacrifices, necessitating legal intervention. In *Sardar Syedna Taher Saifuddin v. State of Bombay*[19], the Court upheld excommunication, prioritizing religious autonomy over civil rights[20]. However, Justice Sinha dissented, arguing it violated human dignity, a perspective aligning with modern human rights. Religious freedom under Articles 25 and 26 is subject to public order, morality, and health. In *Church of God v. KKR Majestic Welfare Colony Associations*[21], the Supreme Court ruled that no religion permits practices disturbing public peace. Similarly, in *Nikhil Soni v. Union of India*[22], the Rajasthan High Court criminalized *Santhara* (ritual fasting unto death), holding that religious freedom cannot override the right to life, though the Supreme Court later stayed the ruling. The pending case on *Khatna* (Female Genital Mutilation) in the Dawoodi Bohra community raises concerns about balancing religious practices with constitutional morality. While cults may qualify as religious denominations, their practices must align with fundamental rights to merit legal protection[23].

We have seen in Chapter II that several activities effect the mental health of the victims and exploit them mentally, physically and emotionally. The practices adopted by the cultic leaders are often against the morality and puts public order in danger. This issue led us to another aspect of freedom of religion where the opinion of Justice Chandrachud in *Sabarimala case* becomes appropriate to deal with the cultic leaders and organisations. He observes-

> *"The assumption by the court of the authority to determine whether a practice is or is not essential to religion has led to our jurisprudence bypassing what should in fact be the central issue for debate … the basic question which needs to be answered is whether the recognition of rights inhering in religious denominations can impact upon the fundamental values of dignity, liberty and equality which animate the soul of the Constitution"*

19 Sardar Syedna Taher Saifuddin v. State of Bombay 1962 AIR 853.

20 Manasi Gopalkrishnan, India's ashrams: Havens for spirituality or scandalous snake pits? DW (Jan. 11, 2021), https://www.dw.com/en/indias-ashrams-havens-for-spirituality-or-scandalous-snake-pits/a-56169280 (last visited Jan. 28, 2025).

21 Church of God v. KKR Majestic Welfare Colony Associations (2000) CRI L.J. 4022 (India).

22 Nikhil Soni v. Union of India (2015) CRI L.J. 4951 (India).

23 Aishwarya Deb, *Religion v. Reform: Role of Indian Judiciary vis-à-vis 'Essential Religious Practices' Test,* 12 SSRN ELEC. J. 14 (2018).

Even though it would be premature to arrive at a conclusion in absence of any precedent and judicial opinion exclusively dealing with the cult practices and organisations, for the purpose of this paper, both of these approaches by the judiciary will make the matter complex. Since the Courts have adopted an individual approach in religious matters, it would be tedious task to identify and segregate cult from religion. The approach suggested by *Justice Chandrachud* is what this country actually needs, where the religious extremism has resulted in violence and hate. The cultic organisations have power to direct their followers against the state as the leader is strong and charismatic. There are practices like female genital mutilation, impaling, baby tossing, limb amputations, fire walking and human sacrifices that are against the human rights and do not require to be investigated as essential practices. Their impact on the Constitution can easily be traced[24].

While the right to freedom of religion ensures equal rights and worship for all, it lacks safeguards against spiritual abuse and unethical influence. Courts have often relied on legal tests instead of addressing violations of fundamental rights like dignity and equality. A broader approach could regulate cultic practices that exploit individuals under the guise of faith. Freedom of religion must protect not only groups but also individuals from coercion and manipulation.

5. A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF THE LEGAL REGIME

The current situation necessitates the implementation of specialized laws, but a fundamental question arises can such legislation effectively regulate cultic organizations and their activities. To answer this, we must analyze the existing legal framework and its applicability. While social issues can be mitigated through education and awareness, meaningful control over these organizations is nearly impossible without robust laws. This section critically examines the relevant legal provisions, their enforcement, and their shortcomings.

5.1 The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS) serves as the primary substantive law addressing criminal offenses, including those related to religion. Chapter XVI of the BNS specifically deals with religious offenses. The intent behind these provisions is to maintain religious

24 Jai Babaria, *Misuse of section 295-A IPC: A Potent weapon in Criminalizing Comedy and Cinema,* The Criminal Law Blog (Feb. 22, 2021), https://criminallawstudiesnluj.wordpress.com/2021/02/22/misuse-of-section-295-a-ipc-a-potent-weapon-in-criminalising-comedy-and-cinema/ (last visited Jan. 27, 2025).

harmony and prevent conflicts arising from religious antagonism.

5.2 Sections 298 and 299

Section 298 criminalizes the destruction, damage, or desecration of places of worship or sacred objects with the intent to insult a religion. Violations can lead to imprisonment of up to two years, a fine, or both. This provision aims to ensure respect for religious sentiments across different faiths. Section 295 takes this a step further by penalizing deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings. The punishment extends to three years of imprisonment, a fine, or both. Unlike Section 298, this provision is cognizable, non-bailable, and non-compoundable. However, Section 299 has often been misused, particularly against individuals raising awareness against superstitions or religious malpractices.

5.3 Misuse of Section 299

There is a notable trend of intolerance in India toward legitimate criticism of religious activities. Religious groups frequently weaponized Section 299 to suppress dissent and criticism. The historical origins of this section trace back to 1927, following the publication of Rangila Rasul, which discussed the marriages of the Prophet Muhammad. The backlash from the Muslim community led the British government to introduce Section 299 to prevent religious insult.

In *Ramji Lal Modi v. State of UP*[25], the Supreme Court upheld Section 298 as a reasonable restriction under Article 19(2) of the Constitution[26], ensuring it applied only to deliberate and malicious insults intended to disrupt public order. Despite this judicial clarification, the provision remains a tool for censorship.

Notable cases highlight the arbitrary application of Section 299. In Mumbai, activist Sanal Edamaruku faced multiple complaints for debunking a supposed miracle at a church, forcing him to flee the country. Similarly, a case was filed against cricketer M.S. Dhoni for appearing as Lord Vishnu in a magazine, but the Supreme Court later quashed it, emphasizing the need for intent to outrage religious feelings[27]. Another example is Munawar Faruqui, a comedian arrested in Indore based on an allegation that he had made offensive jokes without any actual evidence. The Madhya Pradesh High Court denied interim bail, reflecting the extent of abuse this provision enables.

25 Ramji Lal Modi v. State of UP AIR 1957 SC 620.

26 India Const. art. 19(2).

27 Sec'y, Ministry of Info. & Broad. v. Cricket Ass'n of Bengal, AIR 1995 SC 1236.

5.4 Sections 196 and 354

Section 196 penalizes actions that promote enmity between religious, racial, or linguistic groups. The provision is vital in curbing hate speech but has also been misused to suppress free expression.

Meanwhile, Section 354 criminalizes inducing someone to act under the fear of divine displeasure. This provision theoretically applies to fraudulent godmen who exploit people's faith. However, its scope is narrow, and its penalties up to one year of imprisonment or a fine are insufficient given the severe psychological and financial harm such figures inflict.

5.5 Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1988

This Act seeks to prevent religious institutions from being used for political, military, or unlawful purposes. Section 2(f) defines religious institutions broadly, while Section 3 prohibits activities such as storing arms, constructing unauthorized structures, and promoting hatred. Despite its objectives, the Act suffers from major shortcomings. It primarily targets managers and employees rather than institutions as a whole. This means that even if an individual is prosecuted, the institution may continue its unlawful activities. Additionally, the Act lacks a supervisory authority to monitor compliance, reducing its effectiveness. The Act also fails in its implementation. Religious institutions frequently engage in political endorsements, yet legal action is rarely taken. Recognizing these flaws, a 2015 amendment bill sought to prevent the politicization of religious institutions. However, without active enforcement, such amendments may prove ineffective.

5.6 Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954

The Drugs and Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisements) Act, 1954, aims to prohibit misleading advertisements promoting miraculous cures or supernatural remedies. It defines "magic remedies" to include talismans, mantras, and other charms claimed to have supernatural effects. While the Act is a crucial tool against fraudulent religious healers, enforcement remains weak. Godmen frequently evade penalties by exploiting legal loopholes, and authorities rarely take action unless public outrage forces them to intervene.

6. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CULT REGULATION PRACTICES

The regulation of cults and their associated crimes presents a global challenge, with various countries adopting distinct legal and policy approaches to balance religious freedom with public safety. This section examines international practices in regulating cultic organizations, drawing lessons for India's socio-legal framework. By analyzing approaches in France, the United States, and Japan, which highlights effective strategies and potential pitfalls in addressing cult-related issues.

In France, the regulation of cults is notably stringent, driven by a strong commitment to secularism. The 2001 About-Picard Law is a landmark legislation that specifically targets cultic activities. It criminalizes "abuse of vulnerability" in organizations that exploit psychological or physical dependence, with penalties including up to seven years of imprisonment and substantial fines. The law empowers authorities to dissolve organizations deemed dangerous and prohibits their propaganda near vulnerable populations, such as schools. France's Inter-ministerial Mission for Monitoring and Combating Cultic Deviances (MIVILUDES) monitors cultic groups, investigates complaints, and educates the public about their risks[28]. This proactive approach has successfully curbed the influence of groups like Scientology, though critics argue it risks overreach, potentially infringing on legitimate religious freedoms. France's model demonstrates the efficacy of specialized legislation and dedicated oversight bodies, which India could consider to address cultic crimes systematically.

In the United States, the approach to cults is more cautious, prioritizing First Amendment protections for religious freedom. The U.S. lacks specific anti-cult legislation, addressing cult-related crimes under general criminal laws, such as fraud, coercion, or human trafficking statutes[29]. High-profile cases, like the prosecution of the Branch Davidians in 1993 or NXIVM in 2019, relied on laws against racketeering, sex trafficking, and forced labor rather than cult-specific provisions[30]. The U.S. employs a reactive approach, intervening only when criminal acts are evident, which preserves religious liberty but often delays action until significant harm occurs. The absence of a centralized monitoring body, unlike France's MIVILUDES, limits proactive prevention. For India, the U.S. model underscores the importance of robust enforcement of existing laws but highlights the need for clearer legal definitions to address cultic manipulation preemptively.

Japan offers a unique perspective following the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin gas attack by

28 MIVILUDES, *Annual Report 2020* (Fr. Gov't 2021).

29 Stephen A. Kent, *Deviance Labelling and Normative Strategies in the Canadian 'New Religions/ Countercult' Debate,* 15 Canadian J. Soc. 393 (1990).

30 United States v. Raniere, No. 18-CR-204 (E.D.N.Y. 2019).

the Aum Shinrikyo cult, which killed 13 people and injured thousands. This incident prompted Japan to enact the Religious Corporations Law amendments, allowing stricter oversight of religious organizations[31]. The government can dissolve groups deemed a threat to public safety, as seen in Aum Shinrikyo's dissolution. Japan also established monitoring mechanisms to track groups with a history of harmful activities, balancing respect for religious freedom with public security[32]. However, Japan's approach has faced criticism for vague criteria in defining "dangerous" groups, risking arbitrary application. For India, Japan's experience illustrates the value of post-crisis legislative reforms and monitoring systems, though clear legal parameters are essential to avoid misuse.

These international practices offer valuable insights for India. France's proactive model, with dedicated legislation and oversight, could inspire the creation of a specialized Indian agency to monitor cultic activities. The U.S. approach highlights the need for stronger enforcement of existing laws, such as the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, to address cult crimes without new legislation. Japan's post-crisis reforms suggest that high-profile incidents, like those involving figures like Gurmeet Ram Rahim, could catalyze legal changes in India. However, all three countries underscore the challenge of balancing religious freedom with public safety. India must adopt a tailored approach, combining France's proactive oversight, the U.S.'s reliance on existing criminal laws, and Japan's crisis-driven reforms, while ensuring constitutional protections under Articles 25 and 26 are upheld.

7. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The proliferation of fake godmen and cultic organizations in India poses profound social, economic, and legal challenges, exploiting personal faith for manipulation, wealth accumulation, and criminal activities. The analysis of India's socio-legal framework, coupled with international practices from France, the United States, and Japan, underscores the urgent need for targeted reforms to curb these threats while preserving constitutional guarantees of religious freedom under Articles 25 and 26. France's About-Picard Law and MIVILUDES offer a model for specialized legislation and proactive oversight, while the U.S. demonstrates the utility of enforcing existing criminal laws against cult-related crimes. Japan's post-Aum Shinrikyo reforms highlight the potential for crisis-driven legislative action, though clear legal definitions are essential to avoid overreach.

31 Religious Corporations Law, Law No. 73 of 1951 (Japan), as amended in 1995.

32 Helen Hardacre, *Aum Shinrikyo and the Japanese Media: The Pied Piper Meets the Lamb of God,* 47 HIST. RELIGIONS 171 (2007).

To address these issues, India must enact specialized legislation to regulate religious organizations, focusing on accountability for self-styled godmen, particularly in cases of crimes against women and children. Amending the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, to classify sexual offences by godmen as aggravated assault would ensure stricter penalties, deterring exploitation. Financial transparency is critical; religious trusts should be subject to taxation, and anonymous donations must be regulated to curb black money and financial abuse. Strengthening the enforcement of the *Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Act, 1988*, is vital to prevent political manipulation by religious figures. Nationwide adoption of anti-superstition laws, modelled on those in Maharashtra and Karnataka, would combat fraudulent spiritual practices, protecting vulnerable populations. Public awareness campaigns and educational initiatives, in collaboration with NGOs and activists, are essential to dismantle the culture of blind faith and expose the dangers of cults.

While freedom of religion remains a cornerstone of India's democracy, it must not shield individuals or groups violating fundamental rights such as dignity, equality, and life. By integrating international best practices with India's unique socio-legal context, the government can implement robust legal reforms, enhance financial oversight, and foster public awareness to dismantle the influence of fraudulent godmen. These measures will safeguard India's diverse spiritual heritage while ensuring that faith is not weaponized for exploitation, thereby fostering a society where personal belief and public safety coexist harmoniously.