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Kerala blast kills two: Who are Jehovah's Witnesses

What are the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses? What is the group's history in India? What was the landmark Bijoe Emmanuel case in Kerala, involving Jehovah's Witnesses?

Written by [Yashee](#)
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People rush to save themselves after a blast at a convention centre in Kalamassery, in Ernakulam district, Sunday. (Photo: PTI)

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Two people were killed and scores injured after a series of blasts at a Sunday prayer convention of the Jehovah's Witnesses sect near Kochi.

The incident took place at the Zamra International Convention and Exhibition Centre at Kalamassery, where around 2,500 faithful from across the state had gathered for a prayer session.

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Dominic Martin, an estranged member of Jehovah's Witnesses, who is now in police custody, posted a video on social media taking responsibility for the act. "I had been a member of Jehovah's Witnesses for the last 16 years... I realised that their stand is

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anti-national and wanted them to rectify it. But they were not ready for it. I could understand this is a wrong ideology. They inject poison into the brains of children that they should not take even a sweet from others. They are asked not to sing the national anthem or join the defence service. They teach that all people of the world would perish and only they will live. What should we do with the people who long for the ruin of the entire people in the world? I could not find a solution."

Who are Jehovah's Witnesses?

Jehovah's Witnesses are a Christian sect, but do not believe in the Holy Trinity (the doctrine that God exists in three equal persons of the Father, the Son (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit). They worship Jehovah as "the one true and Almighty God, the Creator", who is "the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus". They believe Jesus Christ to be the "King of God's Kingdom in heaven", but not as the Almighty God. They base their beliefs only on the text of the Bible, which they see as the word of God. They don't celebrate Christmas or Easter, because they believe such festivals to be inspired by Pagan traditions.

Jehovah's Witnesses are known for their evangelical work, for which they go door to door, to spread "The Truth". They believe the end of the world is near, and the "Kingdom of God" will "replace human governments and accomplish God's purpose for the earth." The denomination has millions of followers worldwide.

The origins of the sect lie in a Bible Student movement started in the 1870s by American pastor Charles Taze Russell. Today, the Governing Body of Jehovah's Witnesses is located in Warwick, New York. The main body to disseminate the doctrines of the sect is called the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, also headquartered in Warwick.

Jehovah's Witnesses generally keep away from other religious groups. The website jw.org, dedicated to the sect, says, "... we remain strictly neutral in political affairs and avoid affiliation with other religions... However, we respect the choices that others make in such matters."

Jehovah's Witnesses in India

According to jw.org, India has about 56,747 Ministers who teach the Bible.

"Jehovah's Witnesses have been present in India since 1905. They established an office in 1926 in Bombay (now Mumbai), and obtained legal registration in 1978. The Witnesses benefit from the guarantees of India's constitution, which include the right to practice, profess, and propagate one's faith," the website says.

A landmark case involving the sect in India was Bijoe Emmanuel & Ors vs State Of Kerala & Ors. The Supreme Court, in its 1986 verdict, granted protection to three children belonging to the sect, who did not join in the singing of the National Anthem at their school. The court held that forcing them to sing the Anthem violated their fundamental right to religion under Article 25 of the Constitution.

The children, siblings Bijoe Emmanuel, Binu, and Bindu, who were students of Classes 10, 9, and 5 respectively, were expelled from NSS High School, run by the Hindu organisation Nair Service Society, on July 26, 1985. Their parents pleaded unsuccessfully before the Kerala High Court that Jehovah's Witnesses permitted worship of only Jehovah, and since the Anthem was a prayer, the children could stand up in respect, but could not sing.

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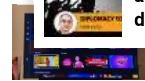
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The Supreme Court then ruled that “Article 25 (“Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion”)...[was] incorporated in recognition of the principle that the real test of a true democracy is the ability of even an insignificant minority to find its identity under the country’s Constitution.”

The Jehovah’s Witnesses website mentions that their members in India have at times been accused of trying to convert people due to their evangelical work.

Another case involving the sect hit headlines in 2020, when a private hospital in Bengaluru claimed it had successfully **performed a live liver transplant on a Jehovah’s Witness from Nigeria**, by not using blood or blood products (fresh frozen plasma, cryoprecipitate, platelets, etc.), in order to protect the patient’s religious beliefs.

In the Bijoe Emmanuel ruling, Justice O Chinnappa Reddy had noted that “Jehovah’s Witnesses and their peculiar beliefs” were not really noticed in India.

The ruling quoted from the Encyclopedia Britannica and judicial pronouncements in Australia to trace the beliefs and practices of the community.

The court noted that according to the New Encyclopaedia Britannica’ (Macropaedia) Jehovah’s Witnesses believe that “the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, their legal agency and publishing arm, exemplifies the will of God and proclaims the truths of the Bible against the evil triumvirate of organised religion, the business world, and the state.”

“The Witnesses also stand apart from civil society, refusing to vote, run for public office, serve in any armed forces, salute the flag, stand for the National Anthem, or recite the pledge of allegiance. Their religious stands have brought clashes with various governments, resulting in law suits, mob violence, imprisonment, torture, and death. At one time more than 6,000 Witnesses were inmates of Nazi concentration camps, Communist and Fascist States usually forbid Watch Tower activities. In the United States, the society has taken 45 cases to the Supreme Court and has won significant victories for freedom of religion and speech. The Witnesses have been less successful in claiming exemptions as ministers from military service and in seeking to withhold blood transfusions from their children,” the ruling stated.

The Supreme Court also cited a ruling of the Australian High Court in *Adelaide Company of Jehovah’s Witnesses v The Commonwealth*, which was a challenge against 1941 Australian law that booked the sect for subversive activities.

One of the charges in that case was that they refused to take an oath of allegiance to the King or other constituted human authority.

The Court also referred to two American cases — *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* and *West Virginia State Board of Education v Barnette* — to note instances where Jehovah’s Witnesses had refused to salute the flag while reciting the pledge of allegiance.

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“It is evident that Jehovah’s Witnesses, wherever they are, do hold religious beliefs which may appear strange or even bizarre to us, but the sincerity of their beliefs is beyond question. Are they entitled to be protected by the Constitution?” the SC asked itself.

with inputs from Apurva Vishwanath

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