Religious Freedom Report 2020

Why in news?

The US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) has released its report for 2020.

What is the USCIRF?

- The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan **U.S. federal government commission**.
- It was created by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), 1998.
- The USCIRF is dedicated to defending the universal right to freedom of religion or belief abroad.
- It monitors religious freedom violations globally and makes policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

What did the report say?

- In the 2020 report, the USCIRF has downgraded India as "Country of Particular Concern (CPC)".
- It has placed India alongside countries, including China, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.
- [In the 2019 report, India was characterised as a "Tier 2 country".]
- The commission recommended that the U.S. government take stringent action against India under the IRFA.
- It called on the U.S. administration to impose targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom.

Why did the USCIRF characterise India as a CPC?

- The USCIRF noted that India took a sharp downward turn in 2019.
- The report included the specific concerns about,
    1. The Citizenship Amendment Act,
    2. The proposed National Register for Citizens,
    3. Anti-conversion laws and
    4. The situation in Jammu and Kashmir
- The commission stated that these concerns are the reasons why it

downgraded India in the report.

What was the Indian response?

- The Indian government repudiated the report and ridiculed the USCIRF.
- The Ministry of External Affairs had rejected the USCIRF statement as neither “accurate nor warranted”.
- It also questioned the body’s “locus standi” in India’s internal affairs.

Will U.S. act as per these recommendations?

- Whether or not the U.S. government acts on the commission’s recommendations depends on American strategic interests.
- The U.S. has used arguments of freedom, democracy, tolerance, and transparency as tools in its strategic pursuits.
- But there is no proof of any uniform or predictable pattern of enforcement of such moral attributes.
- The process can be selective and often arbitrary in spotlighting countries.

What is the pattern that India mirror?

- Mirroring the U.S. pattern, India selectively approaches global opinions on itself.
- It embraces the laudatory ones and rejects the inconvenient ones.
- Overall, the global reports contribute to the construction of an image of a country, and the Indian government is aware of this pattern.
- In March 2020, the Indian government told NITI Aayog to track 32 global indices and engage with the bodies that measure them, to advance reform and growth.

What should India focus on?

- **Ambitions** - India advertises itself as a multi-religious democracy and as an adherent to global norms of rule of law.
- It also aspires to be on the table of global rule making.
- For a country with such stated ambitions, its record on religious freedom as reflected through events of the last one year is deeply disconcerting.
- **Essentials** - Reputation is important for a country’s economic development and global standing.
- But, the rule of law and communal harmony are essential for any functioning democracy.
- Religious freedom is of paramount importance, not because it is about religion, but because it is about freedom.

Source: The Hindu

